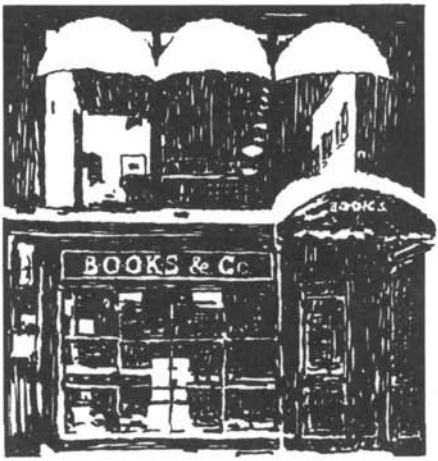
The Paris Review

115 $6.00 £3 50F

Iris Murdoch, Wallace Stegner Interviews
Rick Bass, Paul West, Marianne Wiggins Fiction
Kenneth Koch, James Laughlin Poetry
W.S. Merwin Feature

THE L...
ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
JAMAICA, N.Y. 11439
SEP 10 1990

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"The one way of tolerating existence is to lose oneself in literature as in a perpetual orgy."

—Gustave Flaubert,
in a letter, 1858

B·O·O·K·S

& Co.

939 Madison Avenue

New York City 10021

'phone (212) 737·1450

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A rich, wonderful gathering."*

"Anthologies of little-magazine writing almost always have literary significance, but *The Paris Review Anthology* is historically important as well, since it reminds readers how a new era in letters began."

—David Kirby,
New York Times Book Review

"This anthology testifies to the magazine's zest and audacity as well as to its consistently high literary standards."

—Philip Roth

"The best work of some of the best writers of our time." —T. Coraghessan Boyle

THE PARIS REVIEW ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY GEORGE PLIMPTON

Now at bookstores

*W. S. Merwin

NORTON
500 Fifth Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10110

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FARRAR • STRAUS • GIROUX

Frank Bidart
In the Western Night
Collected Poems 1965–1990
Hardcover 0-374-17660-4 $19.95

Killarney Clary
Who Whispered Near Me
Paperback 0-374-52240-5 $8.95

Lyndall Gordon
Eliot's Early Years
Paperback 0-374-52110-7 $8.95
Eliot's New Life
Paperback 0-374-52205-7 $9.95

Seamus Heaney
Selected Poems 1966–1987
Hardcover 0-374-25868-6 $20.00
Limited Ed. 0-374-25871-6 $75.00
The Government of the Tongue
Selected Prose 1978–1987
Paperback 0-374-52220-0 $8.95

Ted Hughes
Wolfwatching
Hardcover 0-374-29199-3 $14.95

A. Norman Jeffares
W. B. Yeats
A New Biography
Hardcover 0-374-28588-8 $30.00

David Kalstone
Becoming a Poet
Elizabeth Bishop, with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell
Hardcover 0-374-10960-5 $22.50

Aleksandr Kushner
Apollo in the Snow
Selected Poems
Translated by Paul Graves and Carol Ueland
With an Introduction by Joseph Brodsky
Hardcover 0-374-10549-9 $15.95

Federico García Lorca
Collected Poems
Edited by Christopher Maurer
Dual-Language Edition
Hardcover 0-374-12624-0 $40.00
February 1991

Robert Lowell
Collected Prose
Edited and Introduced by Robert Giroux
Paperback 0-374-52267-7 $12.95
Imitations
Paperback 0-374-50260-9 $10.95

Heberto Padilla
Self-Portrait of the Other
A Memoir
Hardcover 0-374-26086-9 $19.95

William H. Pritchard
Randall Jarrell
A Literary Life
Hardcover 0-374-24677-7 $25.00
Michael di Capua Books

Eileen Simpson
Poets in Their Youth
With a New Preface by the Author
Paperback 0-374-52261-8 $9.95

Jeanne Steig
The Old Testament Made Easy
Pictures by William Steig
Hardcover 0-374-22583-4 $6.95
November 1990
Michael di Capua Books

Derek Walcott
Omeros
Hardcover 0-374-22591-5 $25.00

C. K. Williams
The Bacchae of Euripides
With an Introduction by Martha Nussbaum
Paperback 0-374-52206-5 $8.95
Hardcover 0-374-10794-7 $20.00

Charles Wright
The World of the Ten Thousand Things
Poems 1980–1990
Hardcover 0-374-29293-0 $20.00

James Wright
Above the River
The Complete Poetry
With an Introduction by Donald Hall
Hardcover 0-374-12749-2 $27.95

Now at your bookstore, or **call 1-800-631-8571.** To receive a complete catalog of poetry books in print, please write: **Farrar, Straus & Giroux**, 19 Union Square West, New York, New York 10003, or call 1-212-206-5314.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ELAINE

LOVES

THE PARIS REVIEW

ELAINE'S

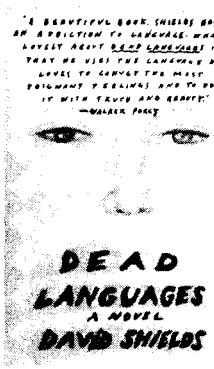
1703 SECOND AVE
NEW YORK CITY

reservations: 534-8103/8114

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOW IN PAPERBACK

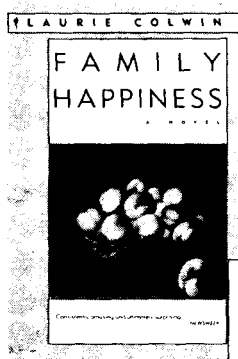
Perfect Vision


"A BEAUTIFUL BOOK. SHIELDS HAS AN ADDICTION TO LANGUAGE. WHAT'S LOVELY ABOUT DEAD LANGUAGES IS THAT HE USES THE LANGUAGE HE LOVES TO CONVEY THE MOST BOISTEROUS FEELING, AND TO DO IT WITH TRUTH AND RESPECT."
—WALKER PERCY
DEAD LANGUAGES
A NOVEL
DAVID SHIELDS

"David Shields is absolutely the real thing...the best prose written about childhood and boyhood since Salinger fell silent." —Leslie Epstein

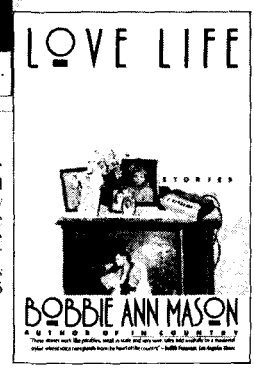
"A powerful work that remains in the reader's mind long after its conclusion." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

$8.95



"Colwin renders the story in colors so fresh and luminous that the reader wonders why no one ever thought to tell it before." —*Boston Globe*

Also by Laurie Colwin,
The Lone Pilgrim
$7.95



"These stories work like parables, small in scale and very wise, tales told wistfully by a masterful stylist whose voice rises purely from the heart of the country." —*Los Angeles Times*
$8.95

"Richly imaginative....Pure adventure."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"No better writing is being done nowadays....The story is all but unbearable in its horror, the more so, because its beauty leaves us almost without defenses." —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*
$8.95

"Jolley's prose captures her heroine's desperation with dark beauty." —*Chicago Tribune*

"Jolley is a true poet of both setting and social tension....Rarely has so much discomfort been painted with so feathery a pen." —*Newsday*
$8.95

PERENNIAL LIBRARY
HARPER & ROW PUBLISHERS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Includes 'Mythologies,' winner of the Bernard F. Conners Poetry Prize from "The Paris Review"

Operation Memory

David Lehman

Responding to *An Alternative to Speech*, David Lehman's first collection of poems, John Ash, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, praised Lehman's poetry as "elegant, exuberant, witty, lyrical and technically sophisticated." Lehman's new book is of equal or even surpassing excellence—notable for its wide range of subjects, its variety of inventions, its combination of wit and poignancy.

Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets

Paper: $9.95 ISBN 0-691-01482-5 Cloth: $17.50 ISBN 0-691-06848-8

Poems

Alvin Feinman

"Because his poetry has been so sparse, Feinman found only a small audience, but they have been select, skilled, and faithful readers. The best of his poems stand with the most achieved work of his generation, with the best of Ashbery, Merrill, Ammons, Hollander, and only a few others."

—Harold Bloom

Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets

Paper: $9.95 ISBN 0-691-01469-8 Cloth: $17.00 ISBN 0-691-06819-4

A Wandering Island

Karl Kirchwey

"So much is surprising in Kirchwey's poetry that I almost forget to exult in what is secure: the music of English words as they build line by line, stanza by stanza, to a shaped and foreseeable style. How readily this poet, trusting his medium to the point of eloquence, can articulate his discoveries, his losses, his loves!"

—Richard Howard

Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets

Paper: $9.95 ISBN 0-691-01481-7 Cloth: $17.50 ISBN 0-691-06847-X

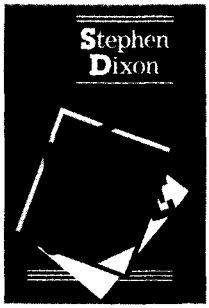
AT YOUR BOOKSTORE OR

Princeton University Press

41 WILLIAM ST. • PRINCETON, NJ 08540 • (609) 258-4900

ORDERS 800-PRS-ISBN (777-4726)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Stephen Dixon

All Gone
18 Short Stories

Elliott tells Maria he's going straight home but now she can't find him anywhere. Mort hates any kind of "hardcore moneymaking work," but he's still taking the job. A semi-conscious accident victim describes a frantic and impersonal rescue. And a lady finds something unusual on a walk through Four Corners Park—in a story called "Heads."

"One of the short story's most accomplished if quirky practitioners."—**Time**

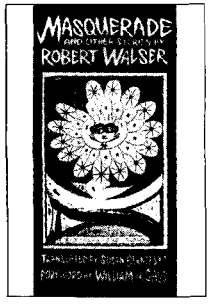
"Dixon is a highly distinctive writer, one whose work has grown deeper and richer over time. . . . At its best, it is understated poetry: witty, heart-breaking, eye-opening."—**New York Times**

"Dixon's best is superb; tragic, funny, cruel. He's telling us all the bizarre things we already know about our selves, and he's right on the mark."
—**Chicago Tribune**

$17.95 *hardcover*

Robert Walser

"Masquerade"
and Other Stories
translated by Susan Bernofsky
foreword by William H. Gass



Walser's was one of the most original literary voices of the twentieth century—before he was misdiagnosed a schizophrenic and committed to an asylum.

"If he had a hundred thousand readers, the world would be a better place."—**Hermann Hesse**

"If I read him aright, Walser became a post-modernist well before the fashion."—**William H. Gass,** *from the foreword*

"[Walser's] deep and instinctive distaste for everything 'lofty,' for everything that has rank and privilege, makes him an essential writer of our time."
—**Elias Canetti**

"Walser is a very special kind of whimsical-serious-deep writer."
—**Guy Davenport**

$12.95 *paperback* $35.00 *hardcover*

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
701 West 40th Street, Suite 275, Baltimore, Maryland 21211
Available at your bookstore or call **1-800-537-5487.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review Put On

Brand new Paris Review tee shirts. Navy blue with white lettering and symbol or white with black lettering and symbol at only $15.00 apiece. Sizes: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large.

THE PARIS REVIEW • 45-39 171 Place • Flushing, N.Y. 11358

White with black. Quantity: _____

Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Ex. Large ☐

Blue with white. Quantity: _____

Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Ex. Large ☐

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....

STATE..... ZIP.....

PAYMENT MUST ACCOMPANY ORDER

(New York State residents please add tax)

MASTERCARD/VISA CARD # _____ EXP. DATE _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

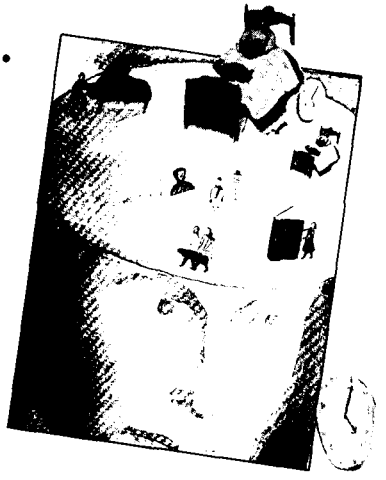
ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

"Middle-aged woman without man wants baby..." Her name is Nina. Divorced, without children, but with emotional baggage (the usual). What's not usual, though, is her life, seen through the eyes of novelist Kelly Cherry in this funny chronicle of motherhood, sisterhood, dependence, self-help...and triumph.

"Richly satisfying...

A coming-to-terms with life from a female perspective...that surprises us with deeply affecting pieces...[It] begins as light as Ephron's ***Heartburn*** and makes a quantum leap along the way into a kind of prayer."

—Kirkus Reviews

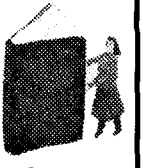


MY LIFE AND DR. JOYCE BROTHERS

"A fine, witty, moving account

...Exhilarating."

—Alison Lurie



A NOVEL IN STORIES BY KELLY CHERRY

A division of Workman Publishing, Inc.

Now at your bookstore

Illus: Lonni Sue Johnson

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Coming home alive is not all there is to survival.

Back in the South after Vietnam, Truck Hardy finds a second war awaiting him: a failed farm, a broken marriage, a dangerous job outside the law, and a growing, self-enforced isolation. This is the post-Vietnam experience as told by a writer who lived it—with a power that makes it linger in memory.

"**Hendricks has a terrific story to tell,** and he delivers it with a perfect balance of passion and artistic control." —Tim O'Brien, author of *Going After Cacciato*

"**Incandescent**... the psychology of the combat veteran has finally been pried open." —Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, *New York Times Book Review*

THE SECOND WAR

A Novel of the Vietnam War

G.C. Hendricks

Philippe Renaudin

VIKING
Penguin USA

At bookstores now

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Travel to your Favorite Writers

THE LITERARY TOUR OF CALIFORNIA

brings you to the homes of

JOHN STEINBECK, EUGENE O'NEILL, JACK LONDON, HENRY MILLER, MARK TWAIN, ROBINSON JEFFERS, ALDOUS HUXLEY, CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD & MORE

See the spectacular landscapes that inspired these and other great writers, visit their favorite haunts, and enjoy a unique holiday with fine California wines and cuisine of today.

5, 9, or 14 day trips: autumn and winter

for a free brochure call:

Cultural Excursions Ltd.
P.O. Box 84159 Los Angeles, CA 90073
(800) 548-5506 (213) 393-9379 fax (213) 393-7384

USA/USSR YOUNG POETS

Reading Tour

In cooperation with the Soviet Writers' Union, 20 American poets currently enrolled in a college or university will be selected to travel to the USSR to give readings, meet friends and visit literary sights ***in Moscow and Leningrad,*** *from January 3-12, 1991 • Cost $1,995.*

Send resumé and five poems in a SASE to
USA/USSR c/o American Poetry Center • 1204 Walnut Street
Philadelphia Pa 19107 • *postmarked by October 1st*
For further information call Philip Kim at 215·546·1510.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Why take it for granta?

Frank

An International Journal of

Contemporary Writing & Art

PUBLISHED IN PARIS

"*Frank* ... the best English language literary review to come out of Paris since George Plimpton's *Paris Review* in the 1950's."
—J.G. Strand

• Rita Dove • Derek Walcott • Bei Dao • John Berger • Paul Bowles • Robert Coover • James Salter • Vaclav Havel • AND the Best of the Unknown! Plus New Work and Foreign Dossiers from Paris, Beijing, Manila, New York, Peshawar, Prague, and Brassaville... DISCOVER with Frank a world of New Writing!

4 Issues/2 Years/$25 US • Single Issue...$8

Name_____

Address_____

Country_____ Postal Code_____

Association Frank
David Applefield, Editor, B.P. 29
94301 VINCENNES Cédex FRANCE

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review

Publisher	Deborah S. Pease
Editors	George A. Plimpton, Peter Matthiessen, Donald Hall, Robert B. Silvers, Blair Fuller, Maxine Groffsky
Managing Editor	James Linville
Editor-at-Large	Jeanne McCulloch
Associate Editors	Antonio Weiss, Beth Drenning
Assistant Editors	Julie Mardin, Charles Rogers
Poetry Editor	Patricia Storace
Art Editor	Richard Marshall
Paris Editor	Harry Mathews
London Editor	Shusha Guppy
Business Manager	Lillian von Nickern
Print Directors	Libby Reid, Christopher Lightfoot Walker
Special Consultant	Robert Phillips
Contributing Editors	William Plummer, Patsy Southgate, Lucas Matthiessen, Joanie McDonnell, Charles Russell, David Michaelis, Ron Bailey, Helen Bartlett, Robert Becker, Joanna Laufer, Lindley Boegehold, John Glusman, Gerald Howard, Tom Jenks, Mary Maguire, Michael Sagalyn, Ileene Smith, Dan Max, Elise Paschen, Bill Wadsworth
Editorial Assistants	Rose Styron, Jill Fox, Mary B. Lumet, Kevin Richardson, Matthew Rose, Jill Birdsall, Michele Somerville, Jennifer Egan, Cheryl Sucher, Margaret Broucek, Adam Begley, Ian Ganassi, Julia Myer, Susannah Hunnewell, Kip Azzoni, Daniel Ellen, Dini von Mueffling, Elif Sinanoglu, Colin Dickerman, Laura Gerrity, Monica Nordhaus, Elizabeth Ziemska, Gerry Visco
Advisory Editors	Nelson Aldrich, Patrick Bowles, Joan Dillon, William Pène du Bois, Drue Heinz, John Train, Harold L. Humes, Ben Johnson, Jonathan Miller, John Phillips, Thomas H. Guinzburg, Lawrence M. Bensky, Frederick Seidel, Terry Southern, Max Steele, Philip Roth, William Styron, Eugene Walter, Christopher Cerf, Tom Clark, Ron Padgett, Maggie Paley, Fayette Hickox, Molly McKaughan, Francine du Plessix Gray, Lindy Guinness, Hallie Gay Walden, David Robbins, David Evanier, Mona Simpson, Jonathan Galassi, Jonathan Dee
Consultants	Squaw Valley Community of Writers, Timothy Dickinson
Founding Publisher	Sadruddin Aga Khan
Former Publishers	Bernard F. Conners, Ron Dante

The Paris Review is published quarterly by The Paris Review, Inc. Vol. 32, No. 115, Summer 1990. Office: 45–39 171 Place, Flushing, New York 11358 (ISSN #0031-2037). Paris Office: Harry Mathews, 67 rue de Grenelle, Paris 75007 France. London Office: Shusha Guppy, 8 Shawfield St., London, SW3. Distributors in the U.S.A.: Eastern News Company, Sandusky, OH. Typeset and printed in USA by Capital City Press, Montpelier, VT.

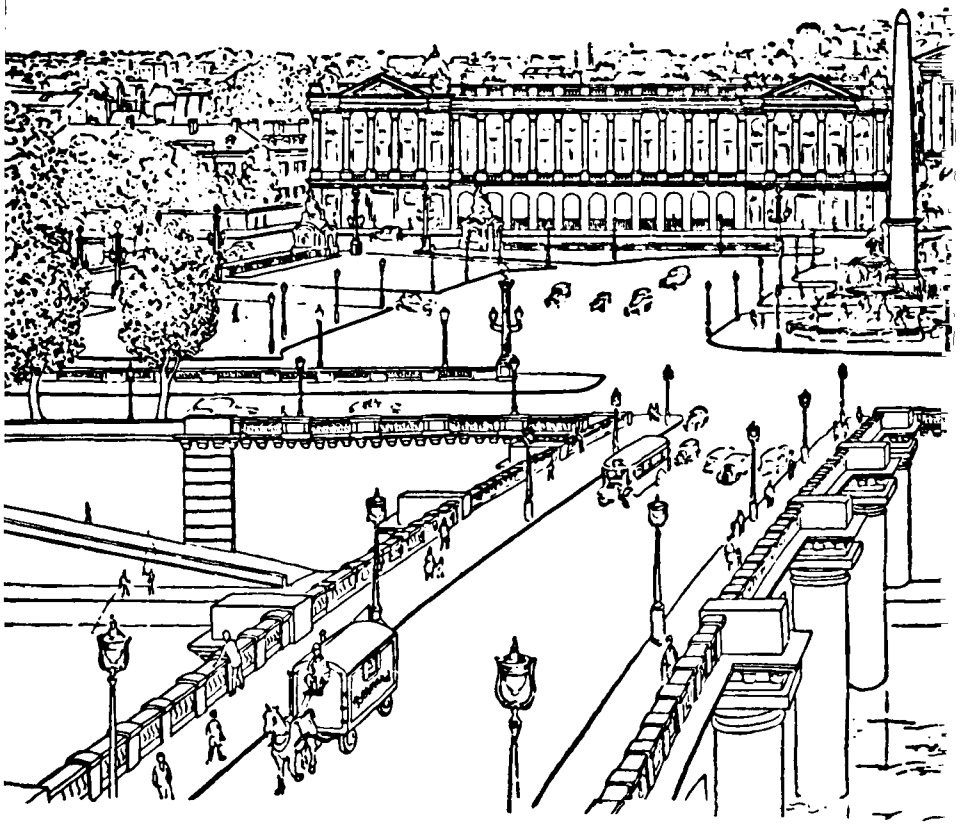
Price for single issue in USA: $6.00; in France: 50F; in the UK: £3. Post-paid subscription for four issues $20, for eight issues $40, for twelve issues $60, lifetime Associate $1000. Postal surcharge of $6.00 per four issues outside USA (excluding life subscriptions). Subscription card is bound within magazine. Please give six weeks notice of change of address using subscription card.

Fiction manuscripts should be submitted to George Plimpton, poetry to Patricia Storace c/o The Paris Review, 541 East 72nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10021. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by addressed envelope and stamps or international postage coupons.

Charter member of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines.
This publication is made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.
Second Class postage paid at Flushing, New York, and at additional mailing office.

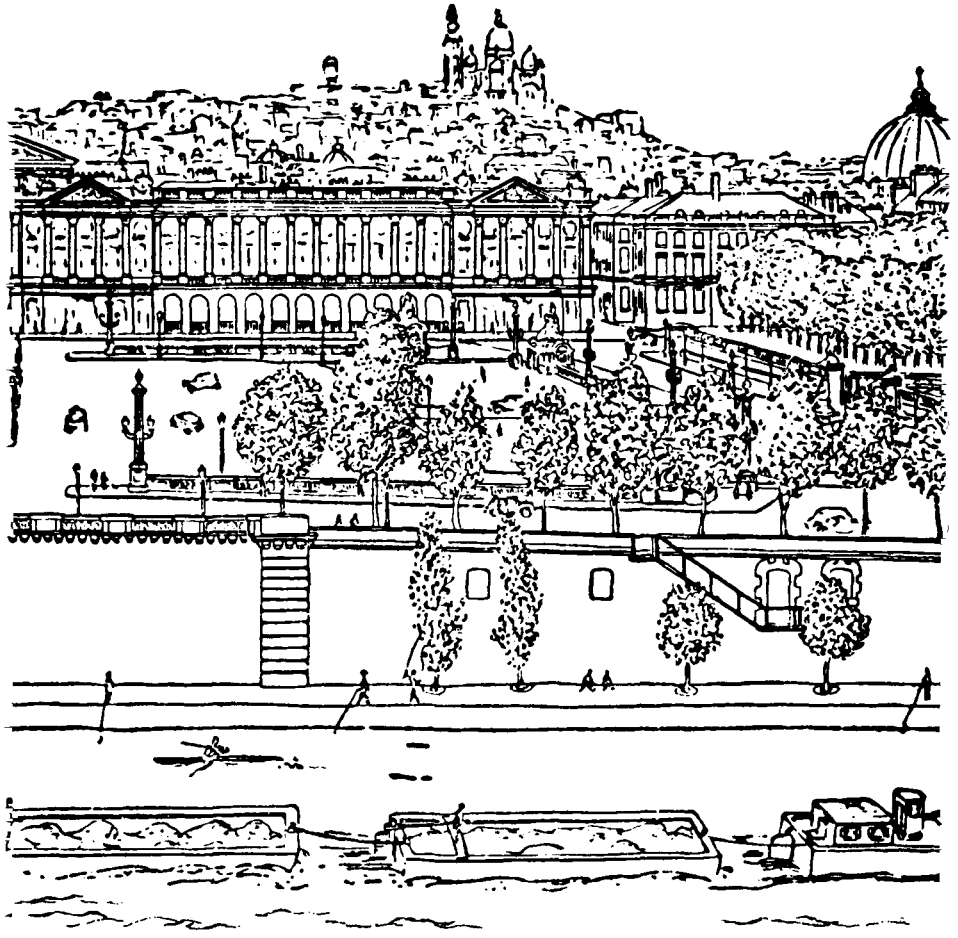
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Paris Review



45-39 171 Place
Flushing, New York 11358

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Eastern News Distributors, Inc.
1130 Cleveland Road
Sandusky, Ohio 44870

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Frontispiece by William Pène du Bois.
Cover by Steve Wolfe, *Untitled*, 1990, oil and pencil on board.
Table of contents illustration by Raymond Pettibon, *Untitled* 1987, ink on paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Number 115

	Interviews	
Iris Murdoch	*The Art of Fiction CXVII*	206
Wallace Stegner	*The Art of Fiction CXVIII*	58
	Features	
Lesley Blanch	*Notes from the Wilder Shores*	127
W.S. Merwin	*The Wake of the Blackfish: A Memoir of George Kirstein*	267
	Fiction	
Rick Bass	*The Legend of Pig-Eye*	20
Emmanuel Carrère	*Channel Crossings*	226
Padgett Powell	*Two Stories*	162
Paul West	from *Portable People*	91
Marianne Wiggins	*A Cup of Jo*	316
	Art	
Jessica Diamond	*New Economic Shorthand*	155
	Poetry	
Tim Dlugos	*G-9*	244
Alice Fulton	*Two Poems*	263
Ghalib	*Two Ghazals*	45
Andrew Klavan	*The Pond*	261
Kenneth Koch	*A Time Zone*	109
James Laughlin	*Two Poems*	203
Elizabeth Macklin	*Two Poems*	196
Walter McDonald	*Two Poems*	51
Kathleen Norris	*A Prayer to Eve*	199
Oskar Pastior	*12 POEMPOEMS*	46
Reynolds Price	*A Single bed, a backstreet in Venice. Two young men.*	42
Yannis Ritsos	from *Repetitions*	194
J. Allyn Rosser	*Two Poems*	55
Robert Saxton	*Two Poems*	123
Susan Wheeler	*Lasting Influence*	121
Baron Wormser	*Two Poems*	200
	Notes on Contributors	319

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOTICE

Literary magazines, among the many beneficiaries of the National Endowment for the Arts grants, recently have been confronted with a crisis of conscience because of the much publicized restrictive wording, amounting to censorship, in the terms of the grant. Our budget will be heavily dented by this refusal of grant monies but we are in the fortunate position of being able to act on principle. Many journals will suffer considerable hardships if they refuse their grants. We wish to emphasize our solidarity with all literary magazine editors whatever decision, in this dismal climate, they feel compelled to make.

It seems appropriate to publish here the letter of refusal to the Grants Office.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Laurence Baden
Grants Office
National Endowment for the Arts
Washington, DC 20506

14 June 1990

Dear Mr. Baden,

The Paris Review cannot in good conscience accept its $10,000 grant from the NEA for fiscal year 1990/91 (Grant # 90-5224-0174) under the terms offered, specifically paragraph two of the "General Terms."

The Paris Review, whose purpose is to publish works that have a "serious literary or artistic value," has been grateful for, and dependent upon, past grants from the NEA—grants from a Literature program that has allowed literary magazines to thrive in the last twenty-five years.

With the adoption of this restriction, the NEA has drawn a line as to what content is permissible in projects it funds, a line that, now in place, may be too easily advanced. Although we question whether any serious work of art can be considered obscene, over the years individuals and groups, all manner of boards and committees, have taken offense at works that are now part of our canon of literature. We point to the recent removal, albeit on a local level, of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* from public library shelves, and we are not reassured. Even *Little Red Riding Hood* and Dr. Seuss have not been spared.

The $10,000 grant would be a significant part of *The Paris Review*'s operating income. If paragraph two can be removed from the general terms of our agreement, or is considered to be unlawful and thus unenforceable, *The Paris Review* will accept the grant with a glad heart.

Sincerely,
Deborah Pease
Publisher

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Legend of Pig-Eye

Rick Bass

We used to go to bars, the really seedy ones, to find our fights. It excited Don. He loved going into the dark old dives, ducking under the doorway and following me in, me with my robe on, my boxing gloves tied around my neck, and all the workers inside the bar turning on their stools, turning as if some day someone *special* might be coming through, someone who could even help them out, perhaps—but Don and I were not there to help them out.

Don had always trained his fighters this way, all of them: in bars, with poor lighting and a hostile, hometown crowd. We would get in his old red truck on Friday afternoons—Don, his wife Betty, and Jason, their fourteen-year-old son, and my two hounds, Homer and Ann—and we'd take out driving, heading for either the coast—Biloxi, Ocean Springs, Pascagoula—or sometimes up into the woods, to the Wagon Wheel bar in Utica, or, if it had been a long enough time, long enough for them to have forgotten the speed of the punches and the force and snap of them, we'd go into Jackson, to the rotting, sawdust-floor bars like the Body Shop or the Tall Low Man. That was where the most money could be made, and it was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sometimes where the best fighters could be found, but not always.

Jason would wait out in the truck with the dogs. Sometimes Betty would stay out there with him, with the windows rolled down, so that they could tell how the fight was going; but other times she would come in with Don and me, because that was what would get the bets up, a woman who had come in with a man and who was not drinking, who was only there for the fight.

We'd make anywhere from five hundred to a thousand dollars per fight, from our bets.

"Anybody, any size, any age, man or woman," Don would say, standing behind the bar with his notepad, taking bets, though I never fought a woman. The people in the bar would pick their best fighter, and they'd watch Betty, and watch Don, or they'd watch their fighter—but they didn't ever watch me the way they should have if they were going to bet on it; and I would look around, I would wish there was better lighting, and then I'd take my robe off, I'd have my gold trunks on underneath, and sometimes a few of them, drunk or sober, would begin to realize that they had done the wrong thing. But by that time things were in motion, the bets had already been made, and there was nothing to do but play it out.

Don had said that when I won a hundred bar fights, I could go to New York. He knew a man up there, a promoter to whom he sometimes sent his better fighters after training them, and that was what I had to do to get up there: win a hundred fights.

Don was forty-four—Betty, thirty-eight—and Don only trained one fighter at a time. Don hadn't boxed in almost twenty years. Betty had made him promise, swear on all sorts of things, to stop, when they got married. Don had been very good, but he had started seeing double after one fight, a fight he'd won but had been knocked down in three times, and he still saw double, twenty years later, when he got tired.

Whenever we talked about the fights, after they were over, it was always *us*, *we*, *ours*. My parents thought fighting was the worst thing a person could do, and so I liked the way Don al-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ways said "we": it was like I wasn't misbehaving all by myself, like it was someone else's wrongdoing, too. Don knew that. We'd come back out to the truck after a fight, carrying the money in a cigar box. A light mist might be falling, in the summer, and Don would be holding my robe over Betty's head to keep her dry, and we'd be hurrying to get out of the rain, but also to get away from the bar.

"How'd it go?" Jason would ask.

"We smoked 'em," Don would say. "We had a straight counter-puncher, a good man, but we kept our gloves up, worked on his body, and then got him with an overhand right. He didn't know what hit him. When he came to, he wanted to check our gloves, to see if we had put *lead* in them."

Jason would squeal, then smack his forehead, wishing that he'd been able to see it, wishing that he'd been old enough to go into the bar.

We'd put the dogs, black-and-tan pups, in the back of the truck. The faithful Homer-dog would be frantic at having been separated from me and would scramble around in the back, howling, pawing and leaping; but fat Ann would curl up on a burlap sack and fall quickly asleep—and we'd go out for pizza, then, or to a drive-through hamburger place, and we'd talk about the fight, as we waited for our order, and we'd count the money to make sure it was all there, though if it wasn't, we sure weren't going back after it. We used the old rattle-truck so that when the drunks, angry that their fighter had lost, came out into the parking lot, throwing bottles and rocks at us as we drove away, it would not matter too much if they hit the truck.

Usually we could tell just from looking at the outside what a place was going to be like, if it was the kind of place where we would have to leave Betty in the truck with Jason—sometimes with the engine running—and where we did not know for sure if we would win or lose.

We looked for the backwoods nightspots, more gathering-place than bar, and with huge, angry men—men who either worked hard for a living and hated their jobs or who did not work and hated that, too, or who hated everything, usually be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ginning with some small incident a long time ago—these were the kinds of men and places we wanted to find, because they were as much of a challenge as any pro fighter would be.

Some nights we would not find the right kind of bar, the one we were looking for, until almost midnight, and Betty would be asleep with her head in Don's lap, and Jason would be driving so I could rest, and the dogs would be alseep on the floorboard. Then, finally, there would be the glow of lights in the fog, the crunch of a crushed-shell parking lot beneath our tires, and a cinder-block tavern, sometimes near the Alabama state line and set back in the woods, with loud music coming through the doors, seeping through the roof and into the night, and the clack of pool balls between songs. It was an angry, caged sound, and we'd feel a little fear in our hearts, it would be just perfect.

"We'll be out in a while," Don would tell Jason. "Pistol's in the glove box. Leave the engine running. Watch after your mother."

The noise would rush out at us like a wild dog when we opened the door, and the smell of beer, the smell of anger, the hostile, attacking eyes turning on us when we were swallowed up inside. . . .

We kept a tag hanging on the rearview mirror that told us how many fights in a row we had won, what the magic number was, and after each fight, it was Jason's job to take down the old tag and put the new one up.

Eighty-six. Eighty-seven. Eighty-eight.

Driving home, back to Don's little farm in the woods: Jason with the radio on, steering the truck with just one hand and with the other arm thrown up over the seat next to him like a little man, already like a farmer driving the truck to market on a Saturday. He was a good driver.

We kept rocking chairs in the back of the truck, for the long drives, and sometimes after a fight Don and I would sit in the back like that, with our backs to the cab, and we'd lean back, looking up at the night, and watch the stars and the tops of the big trees that formed tunnels over the lonely back roads.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We'd whistle down the road as Jason bombed along, driving hard, with the windows down and his mother asleep in the front. The dogs would be asleep at my feet.

When we drove through the creek bottoms the fog would rise all around us, so we could barely see, and Jason would slow down slightly, and the air would be warm and damp, and the stars would be gone, but then we'd be going fast again, getting back up into the hills, and the air would be clean and cool, we'd see stars once more, and we'd be driving sixty, seventy miles an hour.

We'd lean back and talk about fighting. I was twenty, but I wanted to be fourteen again. I wanted to be like Jason, and I wondered what it would have been like to drive my father and mother around *like* that, to be able to do something for them, something right. Jason was already like a little man. My parents lived in Chickasay, Oklahoma, and raised cattle, and owned a store.

I thought it would be nice if I could win the one hundred fights and go to New York and turn pro and send my parents money. Don got to keep all of the bar fight money, and he was going to get to keep a quarter of the New York money, if there ever was any. I wanted to buy my parents a new house or some more cattle or something, the way I read other athletes did, once they made it big. My childhood had been wonderful, and already I was beginning to miss it, and I wanted to give them something.

When I took the robe off and moved in on the bar-fighter, there was Don and Betty and Jason to think of, too. They were just making expenses, barely—nothing more. I could not bear to think of letting them down. I did not know what my parents wanted for sure but I did know what Don and Jason and Betty wanted, so that made it easier, and after a while it became easier to pretend that it was all the same, that everyone wanted the same thing, and all I had to do was go out there and fight.

Don had been a chemist once for the coroner's lab in Jackson. He knew about chemicals, drugs. He knew how to dope my blood, days before a fight, so that I would feel clean and strong, new blood, a new man. He knew how to give me smell-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing salts, sniffs of ammonia vials broken under my nose when I was fighting sloppily, sniffs that made my eyes water and my nose and lungs burn but that focused me, made me remember what everyone wanted. And even in training, Don would sometimes feint, sparring without gloves, and would catch me off-guard, going one way when I should have been going the other, and then he would slip in and clasp a chloroform handkerchief over my face; I'd see a mixed field of black, and of sparkling, night-rushing stars, and then I'd be down, collapsed in the pine needles down by the lake where we did our sparring, and I'd feel the sun on my shoulders, the sun on my back, feel a delicious sense of rest, lying there, and I'd want to stay down forever, but I'd hear Don shouting, counting, ". . . *Three! FOUR! FIVE!*" and I'd have to roll over, get my knees beneath me, and rise, stagger-kneed, and the lake a hard glimmer of heat all around me, and Don would be moving in on me, dancing around me like a demon, moving in and slapping me with that tremendous reach of his and then dancing back, and I had to get my gloves up and stay up, had to follow the blur of him, with that backdrop of deep woods and lake, with everything looking new and different suddenly, making no sense, and that, Don said, was what it was like to get knocked out, and he wanted me to practice it occasionally so that I would know what to do when it finally happened: in New York, or Philadelphia, or even in a bar.

We shaved my body hair before each fight, me sitting in a chair down by the lake in my shorts, while the three of them, with razors and buckets of soapy water, shaved my legs, my back, my chest, arms, everything, so that the blows would slide away from me rather than cutting, and so that I would move faster, or at least *feel* faster—that new feeling, the feeling of being someone else, newer, younger, and with a fresher start.

After they had me all shaved, I would walk out on the pier and dive into the lake, plunging deep, ripping the water with my new slipperiness, and I would swim a few easy strokes, swimming out into the middle, where I would tread water, feeling how unbelievably slippery I was, how free and unattached, and then I would swim back in, and some days, walk-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing with Don and Betty and Jason back up to the house, my hair slicked back and dripping, clean and shaven, with the woods smelling good in the summer and the pine needles dry and warm beneath my bare feet—some days, then, with the lake behind me, and feeling changed, I could almost tell what it was that everyone wanted, which was nothing, and I was very happy.

After our bar fights, we'd get back home around two or three in the morning; I'd nap on the way, though, in the rocker in the back of the truck, rocking slightly, pleasantly, whenever we hit a bump in the road. Sometimes I would dream, completely relaxed, with my robe wrapped around me and the wind whipping my hair; but whenever I woke up and looked at Don, he would be awake.

He would be watching the stars still, or looking back, watching the darkness and trees slide in across the road behind our taillights, filling in behind us as the road thinned and then disappeared, with Jason driving like a bat out of hell, driving with the windows down so that coffee cups and bits of hay and gum wrappers swirled around inside the cab.

Sometimes Don would have turned his chair around, so that he was looking into the cab, looking in over Jason's shoulder watching him drive, watching his wife sleep. Don had been a good boxer but the headaches and double vision had just gotten too bad. I wondered what it would take for me to stop. I could not imagine anything would. It was the only thing I could do well.

On the long narrow gravel road leading in to Don's farm, with the smell of night honeysuckle and the calls of chuck-will's-widows, Jason would slow the truck down and drive carefully, respecting the value of home, and the near-sacredness of the place. . . . Trees formed a tunnel over the gravel lane here, too, and it was dark and cool.

At the crest of the hill he would turn the engine and lights off, up above the lake, and coast the rest of the way, pumping the squeaky brakes, turning the radio off, and in silence we'd glide down the hill. The dogs would smell the lake and scram-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ble to their feet and leap over the sides of the truck and race down to the lake to inspect it, to hunt for frogs.

The porch light would be on, and I had never lost a fight. There was no feeling like it in the world. Part of me wanted to win the one hundred fights and go to New York and see how far I could go, and part of me did not.

I slept in a little bunkhouse, a guest cottage they had built for their boxers down by the lake. Don's and Betty's and Jason's home was up on the hill, a larger home, with a picnic table out front, and a garage—it was a regular-looking house, a cabin. But I liked my cottage. I didn't even have a phone. I had stopped telling my parents about the fights. There was not much else to tell them about, other than the fights, but I tried to think of other things that might interest them. Sometimes I would write them about the lake. Nights, after Don and Betty and Jason had gone to bed, I would go out into the water by myself, and would swim out into the middle, and with the moon burning bright above me, almost like a sun, I'd float on my back, and fill my lungs with air, and I'd just float there, sometimes for thirty minutes or an hour.

The dogs would be swimming in circles around me, loyal and panting, dog-paddling in frantic but determined circles, sneezing water at times, and I could feel the currents passing beneath me as they paddled. They would stay out there with me for however long I was out there. I admired them for staying out there like that, not knowing how to float, always paddling, but staying out there. I felt like I was their father. I felt like an old man, but with my young man's health.

I'd float like that until I felt ready again, until I felt as if I'd never won a fight in my life, and as if it was all new, and I was just starting over, as if I had everything to prove, and had never done anything; that was the way I liked to feel, and I would float there until I was reassured that that was how it really was.

I was free, then, and I would break for shore, then swimming again in long slow strokes, and I'd get out and walk through the trees over to my cottage, with the dogs following,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shaking water from their coats and rattling their collars, and I know the air felt as cool on them as it did on me. We couldn't see the stars, down in the trees like that. It felt very safe, very cool, even though the night was hot.

I'd walk through the woods like that, with my own blood in me, but also another man's, another woman's, too, and another boy's; and I'd snap on my yellow porch light as I went into the cottage, so that it would attract moths, and I'd go into my back room and lie down on the mattress, damp, with all the windows and doors open and the breezes passing over me, cooling me, burying me, with sleep coming like a certain kind of safety.

The porch light pulled in every moth in the county. Homer and Ann would stand on their hind feet and dance, snapping for hours, leaping up at the moths into the smallest hours, teeth clicking, snapping, jumping. There were frogs down on the lake, drumming all night, and crickets and katydids; the noise was like that at a baseball game on a hot day, always some insistent noises above others, rising and falling. I could hear the dogs crunching June bugs as they caught them.

Right before daylight Betty would ring a bell to wake me for breakfast. Don and I ate at the picnic table, a light breakfast, because we were about to run—me on foot, and Don on horseback.

Don was a genius trainer.

"You will miss me when you get up to New York," he said. "They'll lock you in a gym and work on your *technique*," he said. "You'll never see the light of day. But you'll have to do it."

I did not want to leave Betty and Jason, did not even want to leave Don, despite the training sessions. It would be fun to fight in a real ring, with paying spectators, a canvas mat, a referee, and ropes, safety ropes to hold you in—I would not mind leaving the bar fights behind at all—but I could not tell Don about my fears. I was half-horrified that a hundred wins in Mississippi would mean nothing, and that I would be unable to win even one fight in New York.

Don said I was "a fighter, not a boxer."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He had had other fighters who had gone on to New York and who had done well, who had won many fights; one of them, his best before me, Pig-Eye Reeves, had been ranked as high as fifth as a W.B.A. heavyweight. Pig-Eye was a legend, and in Mississippi there were stories and tales about him almost everywhere. Don knew all of them.

Pig-Eye had swum in the lake I swam in; Pig-Eye ate at the very same picnic table. Pig-Eye had lived in my cottage, Pig-Eye had run the trails I ran, daily, the ones Don chased me down, riding his big black stallion, Killer, and cracking his bullwhip, trying to run me down.

That was how we trained: after breakfast, Don would head for the barn, to saddle Killer, and I'd whistle the dogs up and start down toward the lake. The sun would be coming up on the other side of the woods, burning steam and mist off of the lake, and things would be getting clearer, the individual shapes of trees through the mist on the far side, and I'd be walking, feeling for once, or at least briefly, good and healthy, as if I would never let anyone down, and then I would hear the horse running down the hill through the trees, coming after me, snorting, and I'd hear his hooves, the saddle creaking, with Don riding silently, posting, and then when he spotted me, he'd crack the whip once, that short mean "pop!" and I would have to run.

Don made me wear leg-weights and wrist-weights. The dogs, running beside me, sometimes ahead of me, thought it was a game. It was not. Sometimes for punishment, when I didn't run fast enough and Don and Killer got too close to me, Don would catch my shoulder with the tip of the whip, would cut a small stripe into my sweaty back, which I could feel in the form of heat, but which I knew meant nothing, because he was only doing it to protect me, to make me run faster, to keep me from being trampled by the horse.

Don wore spurs, big Mexican rowels he'd bought in an antique store, and he rode Killer hard, and I ran hard, not wanting to let Don down, not wanting to be trampled—and I'd leave the trail sometimes, leaping over logs and dodging around trees and reversing my direction, but still Killer stayed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with me, leaping the same logs, galloping through the same brush, though I was better at turning corners and could stay slightly ahead of him that way, whenever it got too close.

This would go on for an hour or so, until the sun was up over the trees, and the sky bright and warm, and then, too, when Don figured the horse was getting too tired, too bloody from the spurs, he would shout "Swim!" and that meant that it was over, that I could go into the lake.

"The Lake of Peace!" Don would roar, snapping the whip and spurring Killer, and the dogs and I would splash out into the reeds, gasping, scattering frogs and redwinged blackbirds in all directions, the mud warm around my ankles, and then we'd be out into the shallows, me running awkwardly, high-stepping the way you do going into the waves at the beach, and then the dogs were floating, swimming, and it was waist-deep on me, I was leaning forward too, into the warm water, and would feel the weeds brushing my knees, and would hear Killer right behind us, still coming: but we would be swimming hard, swimming for our lives—the dogs would be whining and rolling their eyes back like Chinese dragons, paddling furiously, trying to see behind them. Killer would be swimming too by then, blowing hard through his nostrils and grunting, much too close to us, trying to swim right over the top of us, but the dogs stayed with me, as if they thought they could protect me, and with the leg weights trying to weigh me down and pull me under, I'd near the middle of the lake, the deepest part, where the water turned cold.

I'd swim across that dark cold center, and that was where the horse, frightened, slowed down, sometimes panicking at the water's coldness and swimming in circles, rather than pushing on. The chase was forgotten then by the time I made it out to the center, and the dogs and I would keep swimming, with the other side of the lake drawing closer finally, and Jason and Betty standing on the shore jumping and cheering, waving pennants. The water would begin to get shallow again, we'd feel land beneath our feet, good clean gravel on that side of the lake, and wet and heavy, we'd come crawling out of the lake, and Betty would hand me a towel, Jason would dry off

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the dogs, and then we'd walk up the hill toward the cabin for lunch, which would already be prepared, spread out on a checkered tablecloth and waiting for me as if there had never been any doubt that I would make it.

Don would still be laboring, in the lake, shouting and cursing the horse now, trying to rein Killer out of the angry, confused circles he was still swimming, cracking the whip and giving him muted, underwater jabs of the spurs, until finally, with his last breath, Killer would recognize that the far shore was as good as the near one, that in fact the far shore had somehow *become* the near one, and they'd make it in finally, struggling, twenty or thirty minutes behind the dogs and me.

Killer would lie on his side, gasping, coughing up seaweed, ribs rising and falling, and Don would come up the hill to join us for lunch: fried chicken, cream gravy, hot biscuits with honey, string beans from the garden, great wet red quartersections of watermelons, and long cool slices of cantaloupe, and a pitcher of iced tea for each of us . . . we ate shirtless, barefooted, and threw the rinds to the dogs, who wrestled and fought over them like wolves.

It would be straight-up noon. The sun would press down through the trees, reflecting off of the cabin, off of the tablecloth, off of the ground itself, the pine needles; and out through the trees, down the hill and in the opening in the woods, it would glint off of the Lake of Peace.

We'd change into our bathing suits, all of us, and inflate our air mattresses and carry them down to the lake, and we'd wade out into the lake's warm water, and with suntan oil on our backs and our legs, our cheeks and foreheads, and chests, we'd float directly beneath the sun, wearing sunglasses, our arms trailing loosely in the water, and we'd nap as if stunned after the heavy meal, while the dogs whined and paced the shore, afraid we might not come back.

Killer, still lying on the shore, would stare glassy-eyed at nothing, ribs still rising and falling in the sun. He would stay like that until mid-afternoon, when he would finally roll over and get to his feet, and then he would trot up the hill as if nothing had happened.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We drifted all over the lake, in our half-stupor, our sated, summer-day sleep. My parents wanted me to come home and take over the hardware store. But there was nothing in the world that could make me stop fighting. I wished that there was, because I liked the hardware store, but that was simply how it was. I felt that if I could not fight, I might stop breathing, or I might go down: I imagined that it was like drowning; like floating in the lake, and then exhaling all my air, and sinking, and never being heard from again.

I could not see myself ever giving up fighting, and I wondered how Don had done it.

We floated and lazed, dreaming, each of us spinning out across the lake in different directions whenever a small breeze would blow, eventually drifting farther and farther apart, but on the shore, the dogs followed only me, tracking me around the lake, following, staying with me, whining for me to come back in to the shore.

Some afternoons, after an especially good run and an exhausting swim, I would be unable to even lift my arms. I would just float and perspire, greasy in the sun, with minnows nibbling at my toes, the tips of my fingers, and nothing mattered, I would never move again, and I would sometimes think the blasphemy that this is how I can give up, this is how I can never fight again. I can drop out, raise a family, and float on the lake in the bright sun all day, the Lake of Peace. This is maybe how I can do it, I'd think. Perhaps my son could be a boxer.

Fights number eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one; I tore a guy's jaw off in the Body Shop. I felt it give way and then detach, heard the ripping sound that sounded as if it came from somewhere else, and it was sickening—we left without any of the betting money, gave it all to his family for the hospital bill, but it certainly did not stop me from fighting, or even from hitting hard. I was very angry about something, but did not know what. I'd sit in the back of the truck with Don on the ride home, the dogs' heads in my lap, the wind ruffling their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fur, and I'd know that I wanted something, but did not know what. I assumed it was boxing. Boxing helped.

Sometimes Don would have to lean forward and massage his temples, his head hurt so badly. He ate handfuls of aspirin, ate them like M&M's, chewing them, so bad was the pain, and he chased them down with beer, with two beers, with three or four. I would panic when he did that and think that he was dying, and I wondered if that was where my anger came from, if I fought so wildly and viciously in an attempt, somehow and with no logic, to keep things from changing.

On the evenings that we did not have a fight, we would spar a little, in the barn, Killer watching us wild-eyed from his paddock, waiting to get to me. Don made me throw a bucket of lake water on him each time I went into the barn to make sure that his hate for me did not wane. Killer would scream whenever I did this and Jason would howl and blow on the noisemaker and bang two metal garbage can lids together, a deafening sound inside the barn, while Killer, dripping from the bucket of water, would scream and rear up on his hind legs and try to break free, but the stables were built strongly, solidly, and he couldn't get out—and then, after sparring (Jason with a stopwatch, sitting in the corner, banging the garbage can lids together whenever a round was over) we would go back up to the house, and Betty would fix us supper.

We grilled corn from Betty's garden and a huge porterhouse steak from cattle Don had slaughtered himself, and lima beans and Irish potatoes, also from the garden. It felt like I was family. We ate at the picnic table as bats skimmed and dove, climbed and twisted over the lake, which would be disappearing as the evening fog moved in from out of the woods. When the lake steamed like that, it was as if everyone could see what I was thinking: my thoughts bare and exposed, out in the middle like that, but it didn't matter, because Don and Betty and Jason cared for me, and also because I was not going to fail.

Owls would be calling, back in the woods. We could hear Killer in the stables, chewing his oats noisily, still angry. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dogs would be lying under the picnic table, eyes closed, breathing heavily, sometimes twitching, chasing rabbits. Some day I wanted a family like Don's.

After dinner we would watch old fight films. We used a sheet strung between two pine trees for the screen. We set the projector up on the picnic table and Don used a crooked branch for a pointer. Some of the films were of past champions, but some were old movies of Don fighting. We could make the film go in slow motion to show the combinations that led to knockdowns, and Betty would always have to get up and leave whenever we watched one of the old splintery films of Don's fights. It just wasn't any fun for her, even though she knew he was going to win, or was going to get back up again after going down—and she couldn't ever seem to acknowledge the fact that it wasn't really happening, that it was twenty years old, and that the blows from the past had long ago stopped hurting anyone.

I had seen all of Don's fights a hundred times, and had watched all the films of the greatest fighters thousands of times, and I would get bored. Fighting is not films. It's experience, repetition. I knew what to do, when to do it. I'd look out past the bedsheet, and past the flickering washes of light—Jason and Don would be leaning forward, breathless, watching Don stalk his victim, everything silent except for the clicking of the projector and the crickets and the frogs and sometimes the owls—and I'd wonder what New York was going to be like, if it was going to be anything like this.

Some nights, after the movies had ended, we would talk about Pig-Eye Reeves, Don's best fighter before me. It had only been a few years ago, so Jason even remembered him, though not as clearly as Don did. We were so familiar with the stories that it seemed to all of us, even to me, who had never met him, that we remembered it clearly; both Jason and I knew almost all of the Pig-Eye stories by heart.

Pig-Eye had knocked out one of Don's trained fighters in a bar up in the Delta one night, The Green Frog. That was how Don had found him, he had beaten Don's challenger, had just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stepped up out of the crowd. Don's fighter, whose name Don always pretended he could not remember, threw the first punch, a wicked, winging right, not even bothering to set up with a jab—Don says he covered his face with his hands and groaned, knowing what was going to happen—and Pig-Eye, full of beer, was still able to duck it, evidently, because Don heard nothing but the rip of air, and then, a little delayed, the sound of another glove hitting a nose, a grunt, and the sound of a body falling in the sawdust.

Don and Jason and Betty left the fighter there in the Green Frog, semi-conscious, with blood all over his chest and trunks, and a broken nose. They drove home with no money and Pig-Eye.

They flipped the numbers on the truck mirror, from wherever they had been before—forty-five or fifty—back to one. Pig-Eye had won one fight.

He rode in the back with Don, the way I do now, and they looked at the stars. Betty drove. Jason says he can remember it, but he would have only been about six, and he probably was asleep.

"You just left your other fighter sitting there?" I asked the first time I heard the story, though I know better than to ask now.

Don had seemed confused by the question. "He wasn't my fighter anymore," he said finally.

Sometimes Jason would ask the question for me, so I didn't have to, and so I could pretend it didn't matter, as if I wasn't even thinking about it.

"Is Mack a better fighter than Pig-Eye?" he'd ask after watching the movies, whenever we got to talking about Pig-Eye.

Don would answer like a coach, every time. He was wonderful; he was the best.

"Mack is better than Pig-Eye ever dreamed of being," he'd say, clapping a big hand on my shoulder and neck and giving me the Vulcan death squeeze, his hand the size of a license plate. Jason would grin. Jason would never have to fight for his father's love, or have to prove his own.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tell him about the balloon," Jason would cry, almost every night, when he had reached a fever pitch for Pig-Eye stories. There were many stories, but the balloon was perhaps the best.

Don would lean back against a tree and smile at his son. He would rub his temples slightly, and I'd wonder if he was seeing double, as if he had two sons, twins, waiting to hear his story. The old projector would be cooling down, making ticking sounds in the summer night, and the lights would be off in the house. Betty would have gone to bed. Moths around the porch light, fluttering and falling, and down below us, in the darkness, the Lake of Peace, with bullfrogs drumming, and no other sound.

"Pig-Eye won his last five fights down here with one hand tied behind his back," Don said, closing his eyes and remembering, smiling, and I'd wonder if I could do that, wondered if in fact I'd *have* to do that, to ride down the legend of Pig-Eye, and pass over it.

"We sent him up to New York, to a promoter I knew"—he looked over at me, quickly, it seemed, and I realized for the first time that the summer was almost over, and I would be going even farther away from my home, farther than I had ever been, and I was not sure I wanted to leave, not for any reason—"the same one we'll be sending Mack to, if he wins the rest of his fights"—Jason squirmed with pleasure, thinking, I suppose, of the excitement of it—"and this promoter, Big Al Wilson, set him up in a penthouse in Manhattan, brought all his meals to him. He had masseuses, masseurs, everything. He was the *champ*," Don said. "Everyone was excited about him."

"Tell him about the scars," Jason said, leaning forward, then moving in and leaning against his dad, moving so that his back was right against the same tree, and it was as if they were both telling me the story now, though I knew it too, we all knew it.

It was late, and there was no moon, a field of stars above us, like far-off cities, cities seen down in a valley at night from a long way off, from up in the mountains, and Jason would be yawning, and I would be too.

"Pig-Eye had all these scars from his bar fights, and from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his jobs," Don said. "He'd been in Vietnam, too, and had gotten a lot of scars there; and he flew those crazy hot air balloons for a hobby once he started winning some fights and making some money, and he was always having rough landings, always crashing the balloons and getting cut up that way."

"The big balloons," Jason said. "Eighty-feet tall."

"It was a very disturbing thing to Pig-Eye's opponents, whenever he first stepped in the ring against them. They'd all heard about him, but he really had to be seen to be believed."

"Like a zipper," Jason would say, sleepily, but delighted. "He looked like a zipper. I remember."

"Pig-Eye won fourteen fights in New York. He was ranked fifth, and was fighting well, I went to a few of his fights, but then he changed."

"He got different," Jason cautioned.

"He stopped calling, stopped writing, and he started getting a little fat, a little slow. No one else could tell it, but I could."

"He needed Dad for a trainer," said Jason. Killer nickered in his stall, kicked the paddock once.

"He lost," Don said, shaking his head. "He was fighting a nobody fighter, some kid from Japan, and he just didn't have it, one night. He got knocked down four times, until finally he just couldn't get back up. I saw tapes of it later, and he was sitting up, like one of those bears in a zoo, still trying to get up for a fifth time, but he just couldn't do it—it was like he didn't know where his legs were, didn't know what his feet were for, couldn't remember how to do it."

I thought about the ammonia, the chloroform handkerchiefs Don would sometimes place over my face when we were sparring; I wondered if he had gotten that idea after watching Pig-Eye, his best, part of himself, forget how to stand up. I thought that I surely knew how Pig-Eye had felt.

"The balloon," said Jason. There was a wind in the trees, many nights, and it made me feel young and old at the same time: younger than Pig-Eye but older than Jason, and with no turning back, not ever. "The balloon," Jason would say again, punching his father on the shoulder. "This is the best part."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Pig-Eye was crushed," Don said, sleepy, detached, as if it was no longer Pig-Eye he was talking about, no longer one of his fighters, and I thought again of how they had walked off and left the other fighter, the nameless one, up in the Delta that night, sitting in the sawdust holding his broken nose in the Green Frog Cafe. "It was the only time Pig-Eye had ever been knocked out, the only time he'd ever lost, and it devastated him," said Don.

"One hundred and fourteen-and-one," said Jason. "A hundred and fifteen fights, and he'd only lost one."

"But it was my fault," said Don. "It was how I trained him, it was wrong."

"The balloon," said Jason.

"He rented one," Don said, looking up at the stars, speaking to the night. "He went out over the countryside the next day, his face all bandaged up, with a bottle of wine and his girlfriends, and he took it up as high as it could go, and then he cut the strings to the gondola."

"He was good," Jason said solemnly.

"He was too good," said Don.

All that summer, I trained hard for New York. I knew that I would win my hundred fights. I knew that I could win them with one arm tied behind my back, either arm, if Don and Jason wanted it. I was not worried about winning my one hundred bar fights. I was worried about going up to New York, to a strange place, someplace different. Sometimes I did not want to fight any more, but I never let anyone see that.

Jason was getting older, filling out, that summer, and sometimes Don let Jason ride Killer. We'd all have breakfast, as usual—a small glass of orange juice, half a cantaloupe, two eggs, a strip of bacon and some toast. Then Jason would saddle Killer, and I'd wake the dogs, and we'd start down towards the lake, moving lazily through the trees toward the water but knowing that in a minute or two we were going to be running.

Don would sit in a chair down by the lake to watch us with his binoculars. He had a whistle he'd blow, to warn me when I was about to be trampled.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The dogs and I would hear the horse, the hard fast hooves coming straight down the hill, and without looking back, we'd start to run.

It would be almost six o'clock then. The sun would just be coming up, and we'd see things as we raced through the woods: turkeys taking dust baths in the center of the trail, and deer slipping back into the woods, and cottontails diving into the brush. The dogs would break off and chase all of these things, briefly, and sometimes they'd rejoin me later on the other side of the lake, with a rabbit hanging from their jaws, and they'd be fighting over it, really wrestling and growling—Ann usually the one who'd caught it, but Homer sometimes taking it away from her.

All of this would be going past at what seemed like ninety miles an hour: trees, vines, logs; greens, browns, blacks, and blue—flashes of the lake, flashes of the sky, flashes of logs on the trail. I knew the course well, knew when to jump, when to dodge. It's said that a healthy man can outrun a horse, over enough distance, but that first mile was the hardest, all that dodging.

Jason shouting, imitating his father, and cracking the whip. The sun up, orange over the tops of the trees, the start of another day of perfection. And then the cry, "The Lake of Peace!" and it would be over, either the horse would be tiring or Jason would be, and I'd rush out into the shallows, a dog on either side of me, tripping and falling, the lake at my ankles, at my knees, coming up around my waist then, and we'd be swimming, with Killer plunging in after us, and Jason still cracking the whip.

Actually there were two stories about Pig-Eye Reeves. I was the only person Don told about the second one. I did not know which one was true. Don said it was possible that the balloon story was not the true one.

If it was, Pig-Eye recovered, survived—and, still distraught over losing, came south, tried to come home, back to Don, to start all over again. But Don already had another fighter, he said, and would not train Pig-Eye anymore.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Don rubs his temples when he tells me this. He is not sure if this is how it went or not.

So Pig-Eye despaired even more, and began drinking bottles of wine, sitting out on the dock and drinking them down the way a thirsty man might drink water; he drank far into the night, singing at the top of his lungs, and Don and Betty had to put pillows over their heads to get to sleep, after first locking the doors.

I think this is how it went.

Then Don woke up around midnight—he never could sleep through the night—and he heard splashing.

He went outside and saw that Pig-Eye had on his wrist and ankle weights, and was swimming, out toward the middle of the lake.

Don said he could see Pig-Eye's wake, could see Pig-Eye at the end of it, stretching it out, splitting the lake in two—and then he disappeared. He'd just gone down and hadn't come up. The lake became smooth again.

Don said that he—Don—sleepwalked sometimes, and thought perhaps that was what it was, but he wasn't sure. They'd had the sheriff's department come out and drag the lake, but never found the body. It was possible that he was still down there, and would be, forever.

Sometimes, as Jason and the horse chased me across the lake, I would think about a game I used to play as a child, in the small town in Oklahoma where I grew up.

When I was in the municipal swimming pool, I would hold my breath, pinch my nose, and duck under the water and shove off from the pool wall's pale blue side, like a frog, breast-stroking, eyes wide and bulging in the reddening chlorine, and I would try to make it all the way to the other side without having to come up for air.

That was the trick, to get all the way to the other side. As the water deepened, there'd be a drumming in the back of my head, and the sinister whine of my ears, pressure, and too, the heart and throat clawing tightly, about halfway across.

I thought about that game, as I swam with Jason and Killer close behind me. I seemed to remember my dogs being with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me then, swimming in front of me, as if trying to show me the way, half-pulling me across. I know it was not that way at all, because this was many years before their time, and I knew nothing about dogs, or boxing, or living, or trying to hold onto a thing you loved, and letting go of other things to do it.

I only understood what it was like to swim through deeper and deeper water, trying as hard as I could to keep from losing my breath, sucking in water, forever, and trying, still, to make it to the deep end.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reynolds Price

A single bed, a backstreet in Venice. Two young men.

Fifteen or twenty more dollars a night,
They could enact this solemn start
On the Grand Canal, if just in a garret
With a dim slot-window.
Still, it's Venice—
A clean room with a locked door,
Two tall windows on a dwarf piazza;
And while they hear no actual water,
No lone cry from a spare gondolier,
The family home in which they've found
This private air is more than half-
Adrift on morning (the morning borne
On a tan Adriatic) and yielding, atom
By limestone atom, to the sleepless gnaw
Of an indolent sea, yards away.
The past two nights they shared the room
With a pair of jokey college friends
Who left for Rome in pre-dawn dark.
Now as a light like primal shine
Endows the room—bruised black chairs,
Muddy tile—with a blinding heat
That soon begins to sound in silence,
A Gabrieli bronze fanfare
Climbs both their minds: muffled, slow

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As if this ancient cubicle
Has waited eons for their one visit
And will not let this single chance
Expire untasted, unproclaimed.
  Three yards apart, both hear it plain.
Separate, they hope it strengthens round them;
Hope the wizened crone whose pallet
Creaks beyond their massive door
Will snore on through it, unamazed.
Both wonder *Chance for what and how?*
And neither stirs, though the glory
Builds to a reckless pitch and threatens
To stagger, crumble fast.
  Then the older
(Just turned twenty-three, a former coward
Chilled and starving) throws off his sheet
And moves to the younger (a month away
From twenty-one), sits on the narrow
Edge of his cot and, finding clear eyes,
Names the day—"Good Friday. Morning."
  The younger nods, oblivious
That what he brings to the awful day—
This opulent light, this city noble
As any built—is a head, a face
Of preposterous majesty: fit to be here,
Fit to bear frank human worship,
Worthy goal. The younger smiles,
Slides left to make a narrow harbor,
Says "Then rest."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The older thinks
Good Friday rest, accepts the welcome,
Joins this body splendid as the dark
Cadenza flooding down the slatted
Sun that finds both bodies warmer
Still and half as strong
As its own star-born killing shine.
Thirty-three light years fling on—
Older, younger: each can still
Recall the weight of every beam
From that high window, taste the welcome
Salt of healing shine from God
On His death day, in that one cheap
Dissolving room, the secret home
They never leave.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Ghazals by Ghalib

For the raindrop, joy is in entering the river—
Unbearable pain becomes its own cure.

Travel far enough into sorrow, tears turn to sighing;
In this way we learn how water can die into air.

When, after heavy rain, the stormclouds disperse,
Is it not that they've wept themselves clear to the end?

If you want to know the miracle, how wind can polish a mirror,
Look: the shining glass grows green in spring.

It's the rose's unfolding, Ghalib, that creates the desire to see—

* * *

In every color and circumstance, may the eyes be open for what comes.
The colors of tulips and roses are not the same,
Yet in each we assent to the single Spring.

We turn our hands to the sketchbook only for Love:
Needing some pretext for meeting.

What sorry man drinks for pleasure?
Night and day, I raise oblivion's glass.

In the hour of forgetfulness, the head lies by the wine-jar;
In the hour of prayer, the face turns to the Call.

Let me be clear: however the world's goblet turns,
Those who know are always drunk on the wine of the Self.

—English versions by
Jane Hirshfield

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oskar Pastior

12 POEMPOEMS

an ear goes for an ironic walk it greets the increasing entropy denying however a lupin the cloud column is introduced the ear turns itself into a doric helix by means of a sound shift a logos reveals itself as a transvestite nevertheless the ear continues to listen a prefix is riveted to it an apophony calls generalities into question and evokes remote tenses whereupon a waste gas is concretized and at the same time a common dialect word deepened and heightened through double negation the simple lupin is malignant but not vengeful it confirms the ear the ear is ironic but not uninformed it confirms the increasing entropy historifying repetition of the cloud column suggests the thought without voicing it that everything is to be found in and nothing between the lines with such intensity that a waste gas floating between the lines casts doubt on the thought and simultaneously although not causally connected confirms the doric helix whereupon a couple of in fact quite insignificant stimulus words mutually disclaim one another and however through the presence of this and in contrast to the remote tense come to be thought of as present and repeatable viz generally attested to whereupon the doubly negated dialect word coagulates with its homonym to form a metaphor in which one of the two negations skeptically recants itself because the poem ends here the metaphor is very serious this seriousness transposes itself onto the whole poem the whole poem confirms a complex state of affairs and places itself positively in question

the spiral poem proof of the talent of a car mechanic from luneberg came into being through decades of struggle the supporting medium was provided by a section of roughly neckstrength 6mm diam. spiral steel spring as long as a fore-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arm employing an engraver's glass and admirable precision the author had engraved the surface of the spiral spring with sections of the manifesto of the communist party in likewise spiraliform characters with in addition winding its way as it were in the opposite direction to the writing spiral a second writing spiral with sections from the libretto of the magic flute the metal spiral can thus be read in both directions the reader's position is tricky though because he ends up alternately in the neck of the spiral spring inside the steel coil and somewhere outside of it but in any case himself performs a spiral movement with a certain amount of dexterity acrobatically gifted readers can despite the contortions intertwinings dislocations and tactically split attention which are necessary from time to time follow both spiral texts viz text spirals at the same time

the dialect poem nourishes itself from roots nightingale tongues frogs-legs but it loves budleias so much that it is ashamed of itself on the other hand one should not pass the dialect poem without sending it my greetings once a ventriloquist kidnapped it and had it recited by a white wall in south wales but he didn't want a penny for it now one can write what one wants

the reading poem has an artery and five vesicles installed in the artery is a sort of pneumatic postal system which operates in both directions in the first vesicle are transylvanian kukuruza maize seeds in the second are the sounds from antiquity in the third are all the remainder up to and including the present day in the fourth are letters of the alphabet and in the fifth a minced erl-king complex the five vesicles have varying coloured valve flaps and the valve flaps are operated by five guiding principles also known as vowels the reading poem reads in several languages but is at its loveliest in the middle vosges idiom of the transalpine fan delta the reference to the pneumatic postal system which operates in both directions is important because it provides the key to the interpretation the reading poem functions digitally and can be connected up to people books meetings philosophies governments

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

landscapes as well as to the zeitgeist in the central clock tower in amsterdam it reads for as long as it is connected the descending air tremor originates from the valve flaps and wavers between two and fifteen decibels the reading poem is an occidental one

*the first line describes the word SOCK without using it the sec*ond line uses the word FIERCEST without describing it the third line describes the description of a cold cure without giving the name of the manufacturer the fourth line uses the word CIRCUMSPECT which is very similar to the name of the manufacturer the fifth the sixth the seventh and the eighth lines describe a vague feeling by replacing the single words of the compound in the fourth line to wit CIRCUM and SPECT with a number of very similar words like CIRCUS HORN-RIM SPECS ACT CURRICULUM VITAE TAPEWORM SPIT CONSUME CONVICT SCRATCH among others the ninth line uses a word appropriated from nature PXTSCHIIIII—without describing it the tenth line uses no words thus describing a hiatus which however a glance at the eleventh and last lines of the poem proves retrospectively to be the anticipation of the word KATARSTROF which is neither described nor used the eleventh and last line describe and use nothing more than the suffix -ous nevertheless with imperative acoustic fidelity the poem is a typical poem of warning cf heroic poem

*INSIDE THE TROJAN HORSE is a poem with two begin*nings a middle section and two endings it would look like an X but INSIDE THE TROJAN HORSE is a large dark tricky business and apart from that there are discrete dark points a singing mole a whistling collar bone and roaming genitive objects added to which there is the temporal axis on which the poem sits and can be turned but it does not bother about that for it is called INSIDE THE TROJAN HORSE and not the trojan horse

the shiver poem shivers at the idea that it might consist of a speech act which could claim that it had made itself so inde-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pendent in the form of a thought act within the poem that it would shiver during its speech act at the very idea of shivering the shiver poem is foolish to think such a thing then how can the mere thought of shivering produce shivering

the lift poem consists of a piece of wrapping paper it is folded three times stuck once and snipped at both ends with a pair of scissors the informative value of its production is small in comparison to that of the social interaction which after all takes place in the lift in addition a length of twine a pair of binoculars and 1-2 witnesses are required if the lift is in motion then the piece of wrapping paper the length of twine the pair of binoculars and the 1-2 witnesses are also in motion in this way nothing goes missing on the contrary outside observers gain the impression of an art concept while the witnesses confirm that this has NOTHING to do with A KITE

on the first chair sits the poem reading the paper on the second chair sits the author and mulls on the third chair sits leisure time organising a person on the fifth chair sits the conversation partner tippling on the sixth chair sits the flibberty-gibbet and creates on the seventh chair sits the concept correcting proofs on the eighth chair sits nobody looking in on the ninth chair sits the tenth chair on the tenth chair sits another person conducting a conversation on the eleventh chair sits another poem correcting concepts on the twelfth poem sits the reader the twelve chairs are a film poem with the sub-title ROSIN

now the dream poem is neither composed nor read nor otherwise manipulated either in the author's dream or the reader's or in anyone else's nor is it concerned with a dream from the author or the reader or anyone else nor does it dream itself or the author or anyone else no the dream poem has nothing whatsoever to do with dream-like states or relationships or other after-effects it is also completely lacking in parables or any explorations into character it does not predict it does not provide in-depth divinations it is not formed like a chinese box how so it is so because everything is possible in the dream poem and negations have no consequences

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when the party starts at four the climax begins at six when the poem starts with the party the climax beings with the end when the end starts at six the party begins with the climax when the climax starts with the end the end begins with the poem when the end starts with the party the poem begins with the climax when at six the poem starts the poem begins at four when the climax starts the poem begins with the end when the poem starts the end begins

the POEMPOEMS are slightly more different to the paper than the paper to them located within this margin of play are the chances and the misery of the one as well as the others the POEMPOEMS can be compared solely with those things which bear comparisons in this respect they are mandatory as inventions they are subject to wear and tear as german texts however they behave other than theory to give an example they serve a number of purposes and have the laugh on their flip side in the midst of silence the muses do battle

—translated from the German by Malcolm Green

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Walter McDonald

Digging on Hardscrabble

In a deep well I swung a pickax
into packed caliche, so dark I aimed the ax
by feel. My brother leaned back safe
away from me. Sweat was a blessing
the body gave. My brother called out
and drank, metal canteens the only
water we might find. I sank down
to my knees, baptized myself

and drank, more soothing to my back
than to my tongue. If dirt walls cracked,
we could be buried, salamanders
after years of drought. Better clay than this
had crumbled, one cousin crushed
when I was nine—Daingerfield, pine country,
black dirt heaped higher than my head.
But we were stranded on parched

hardscrabble plains, digging for water
the old way. A travelling dowser
rambled over our rocky acres
and pointed, quivering sycamore stick
bone-dry and hollow at the core.
And though we knew three wells out of four
are sand, this was our fourth.
Kneeling, nearing the limit of our hour,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I groped for the other shovel,
scooped fast to fill the muddy bucket,
and tugged. Faces we loved looked down
from up above and reeled, the creak
and clatter of the rope and pulley. I drained
the last canteen, then reached for the rope
and sent my brother up, spinning
into almost liquid light.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Goat Ranching on Hardscrabble

In another parched summer,
Comancheros gone, we rock
on the screened back porch, fanning,
watching black buzzards circle like clocks,
calling their lazy cousins to supper.

We sip iced tea, rolling cold glasses
on our skin. Not one thick cloud
for months, the weeds so brittle
goats snap them off like sticks.
We keep the fences strung,

the windmills turning. We wonder,
are we here by choice?
Great-grandfather left the cavalry
for this? After renegade arrows
and bullets he stayed in Texas

where topsoil was sand and free.
He said he needed sun to heal.
The only blood he lost in forty years
dried on these hardscrabble rocks
already red. These goats

are not his goats. Imported rams he bred
were sterile, cotton the only way
he kept from starving.
If he wondered about God,
when he stumbled on this canyon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in smelly blues on horseback, chasing
the last straggling Comanchero raiders
off the plains of Texas,
he believed—a hidden range, enough water
to bathe in, far enough from others

to build a shack with a back porch
and do whatever he wanted, rocking for days
in the shade, watching buzzards thirsty
for his blood, daring anything
to make him leave.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by J. Allyn Rosser

A Sense of Connection, as in

moments like this one, the green carpet
looking for once just the right green,
is it the lighting, or your shadow thrown
from the tan-and-rust couch where you sit, lightly—
you seem in your reverie almost to hover—
clashing horridly in your incredible socks
with the magenta stripes above the sneakers
slashed by, even oozing with, crimson shoelaces;
and yes, to be completely honest, you're wearing
the T-shirt of yesterday. Orange stripes. But
I don't care, that is I love the angle
of your chin when you read and the color
of the shadow you throw without knowing it,
though even as I write, though I hate
to have to accept it just yet,
you've already begun to move, you've gone
into the kitchen, now calling softly to me
about a peach in the refrigerator, the mold
on the peach, asking me considerately do I want
to try to save it? and I'm touched,
a trifle puzzled but touched
and awed to the point of leaving my mouth open
to think that the color of it, the peach-mold,
probably exactly matches the precise hue
of the unshadowed carpet you've left me,
and I can safely say I'm delighted daily
with such unlooked-for symmetries as you
in your youness provide, all unwitting,
and I want to call softly back not just *No,*
let it go, but a harmonizing phrase, a signal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to bring you with a sudden smile in here
to evoke again that shadow on the carpet
that so often separates us, I'm actually craving
physically I think the even-toned, sturdy aquamarine
shadow that falls from the changeable zoo
of your otherness . . .
                but you're very busy
washing, no rinsing something at the sink, no, now
chopping something harder than a peach,
I wonder if you'd even hear me, chopping in there,
chopping and chopping with disarming diligence
at the makings of a green salad.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The City Underneath

I.

There is a woman living inside
that man, deep in his chest, almost
in spite of his life. She is beautiful
and sleeps all day, barely stirring or breathing,
though you'd never know it to look at him. Go on. Closer.
Note the jawline. He has developed a thicker, roughened skin
that keeps her in.

II.

You'd never guessed? There is another
underneath—nothing like this one, with these
flattened beer cans studding the gutters. They have
none of our poorly painted women, wan men, fearful odors.
They walk on lawn, among lilacs. Fountains. They smile to see
one another, and can be heard singing softly in the street
beneath
the one we're on.

III.

Stand very still some coolish evening.
See if you can't grasp the extra galaxy past
the last one visible on clearest nights—don't look
for anything. Let your eyes go completely out of your head.
Just make sure it's dark, cool. Stand very still. Look at me,
my eyes, if that will help. The words I really want to say to you
are under these.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sally walks along with her lower lip thrust out and her eyes on the ground. She raises her eyes to watch Sid slashing away at the brush and young maples that road, clog our dubious ~~way~~, while Charity comes along behind throwing the larger brush out of the way. "She'll just die," Sally says. ~~She's set her heart on it.~~ She wants to build their lives into Madison and the university. ~~She's going to build that house.~~"

"I know. But Jesus, you should see what' he's been doing. Browning's use of music. Browning's debt to Vasari. Those are her ideas of what makes an article. Those are the things she wrote term papers on at Smith. Why can't she let him be? Something will come out of a man as good as that---a marvelous ~~companion~~, a real prince, a big ~~strong~~ handsome rich ~~male~~ who's read everything, and remembers it, and can talk about it, but ~~hasn't~~ anything original ~~to say~~ about it, to order. ~~Even if~~ he doesn't get promoted, ~~at Wisconsin~~, they're not in our fix. They could just stay on. Charity could go on being Mrs. Madison."

"Not without a job. She'd be ashamed. So would he."

"Then they could move up here and live the year around and be country gentry."

"His New England conscience would gnaw at him."

~~"His conscience or his pride?~~ ~~She must suspect that one.~~

"He could get a job in a prep school where they don't make you publish."

"Yes?" she says. "Why haven't you?"

Good question. But I am stubborn. "He could take walks and write poems."

"Charity thinks he kids himself about the poems. She thinks they aren't very good."

"They're a damn sight better than his articles."

We walk along in silence. Says Sally, throwing me a sidelong, dark, thinking look, "If it were Charity bucking for promotion, she'd make it."

"You bet she would. But she can't make him make it, if his heart isn't in it. When you're nailing a custard pie to the wall, and it starts to wilt, ~~you~~ it doesn't help to ~~don't just~~ hammer in another nail."

Now she is almost angry. "You can't think he's a custard pie."

A manuscript page from Wallace Stegner's most recent novel, Crossing to Safety. *Stegner apologized that his markings are not more revealing: "My methods are prelapsarian and prewordprocessarian. It takes me many rewritings to get a first draft, and all the chapters that went into it have been thrown away successively until I get something that will read consecutively. I go through that with an editing pencil and retype it to make a relatively clear second draft."*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

© Leo Holub

The Art of Fiction CXVIII
Wallace Stegner

Wallace Stegner has published thirteen novels, three short-story collections, sixteen nonfiction titles, and has edited eighteen works in the fifty-three years he has been publishing books. His first novella, Remembering Laughter, *won a Little, Brown Prize in 1937, and in 1990 Random House published Stegner's collected stories.*

As early as 1944, Sinclair Lewis hailed Stegner as "one of the most important novelists in America." There are those who know him only as a prize-winning historian; or only as the biographer of John Wesley Powell (Beyond the Hundredth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Meridian, *1954*) *and Bernard DeVoto* (The Uneasy Chair, *1974*). *There are those who know him only as a novelist for* Angle of Repose *(1971), a transcontinental novel that earned Stegner a Pulitzer Prize. And also, there are those who know Stegner as a "damned environmentalist." During the Kennedy Administration, Stegner became a special assistant to former Interior Secretary Stewart Udall. Later, he served on and then chaired the Advisory Board for National Parks, Historical Sites, Buildings and Monuments.*

Turn the conversation too far in this direction, however, and Stegner alternates between genuine modesty, subversive silence, and cantankerability. ("We all *have ethical and moral obligations! I've done nothing laudatory or unusual.") Suggest a connection between Stegner's teaching years at Stanford (1946–1971) and the success of his students, and Stegner demurs. ("Those writers would have succeeded anyway," he insists. "Nothing could have stopped some of them.") Still, the list of those who have held fellowships bearing Stegner's name during his years at Stanford is itself impressive, and includes the following: Edward Abbey, Max Apple, Peter Beagle, Wendell Berry, Blanche Boyd, Eugene Burdick, Raymond Carver, Max Crawford, Ernest Gaines, Ken Gangemi, Merrill Joan Gerber, James Baker Hall, Jim Houston, Ed McClanahan, Tom McGuane, Larry McMurtry, N. Scott Momaday, Gurney Norman, Tillie Olson, Nancy Packer, Charlotte Painter, Judith Rascoe, Robert Stone, Robin White, and Al Young.*

In person, what first impresses many people is Stegner's appearance. Even at the age of eighty-one he looks exceptionally youthful and handsome. He wears his clothes well, including an old bathrobe or a workshirt and jeans. He rises early—sometimes too early for a houseguest from Idaho—breakfasts, then retreats before first light to the manual typewriter inside the study adjoining the Stegner home. Both the house and the study overlook the woods and meadows of the Los Altos Hills. On cool mornings, Stegner lights a low fire in the stove and then writes until lunch.

Although far from uncluttered, his study nevertheless seems orderly and neat. On its entrance wall and to the left

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of it, bookshelves run from floor to ceiling; opposite the entrance, honorary degrees, awards, certificates and memorabilia take the place of bookshelves. To the right sits Stegner's broad wooden desk, on top of it more books, a few cigars, an ashtray, and manuscript pages. Behind the desk are photos of friends like Bernard DeVoto and Robert Frost; below these, more bookshelves tightly-packed with contemporary classics.

INTERVIEWER

When did you decide that you had to be a writer?

WALLACE STEGNER

I'm a writer by the sheerest accident. Nobody in my family had ever gone to college. I did, and there they said, "You've got to major in something." So I said, "Fine. Economics," and I took one course in economics and that cured that. Then, my freshman English teacher thought I had some kind of gift. So he put me in an advanced class, which gave me the notion that I could put words together in some fashion. I wrote some short stories as an undergraduate, won a little prize at one of the local newspapers. But I was selling rugs and linoleum, and, as far as I knew, I would go on selling rugs and linoleum for a living. I wrote this piece of stupidity into the novel *Recapitulation* because it seemed to me nobody above the stage of a cretin could have been so completely unaware, so totally naïve so unsophisticated, wide-eyed, going any way he was pushed. I was silly putty.

When I finished college, a couple of my professors pushed me off to graduate school. When I had finished that, I went back to Salt Lake to teach, and after two years of recovering from the Ph.D., I sat down one afternoon and wrote a story just because I wanted to write a story. I wrote it in about two hours and sent it off to the *Virginia Quarterly*, I think, and they published it. Then you know you're hooked. By that time I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. I hadn't been grinding away at a literary apprenticeship, and I had given writing up as a possible career. It never occurred to me that there was a possibility of making a living at it. So it was all pure, brute acci-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dent, with some people who encouraged me along the way. That's probably the way it is. You do get encouraged when you're young and malleable by people who think they know better than you what you're good for. And they may be right. Certainly, I'd have made a terrible economist.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consciously go in search of book projects? How did your novel, *Crossing to Safety*, begin?

STEGNER

No. I don't go in search of projects. Sometimes they appear before my eyes, and sometimes they grow over a long period of time as I brood. Sometimes I know there's a book there, and I have to hunt through an awful lot of research material, as I did with *Angle of Repose*. I have started books without knowing where they were going to end. That's more dangerous. But in the case of *Crossing to Safety* the book just grew, more or less, through personal experience in Vermont, Wisconsin, and to a small extent, in Italy. In those places what was gradually developing in my mind could find a home. That's how the book came about. It took a long time. I had to do it by trial and error, and I was years in getting it finally sorted out. It's not a conscious process.

INTERVIEWER

Was there any point where you definitely knew this project was a novel?

STEGNER

I knew from the beginning it was going to be a book. You have that feeling. It's like having a fish on the line. You know when it's an old boot and when it's a fish. But I didn't know *what* the book was. I've got piles of manuscripts over there, eight and ten inches high, of stuff written and tossed aside in the process of finding out. At several points the novel was going in entirely different directions. It had different characters

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from those that now appear, more characters, episodes that never got into the finished book at all. The novel started in a different place. It proceeded toward a different end.

INTERVIEWER

In writing the new novel did you confront any technical challenges you had never faced before?

STEGNER

There were problems in this book, partly because it's a very quiet book. Not much happens in it. It contains none of the things that seem to be essential for contemporary novels. Much goes on in the mind, in memory. I was doing something that I would have advised almost any student of mine not to do: I let nearly the whole book happen in one head, during the course of one day. There's a little bit of front-stage action during the day, but most of the book curls back and picks up the past. It's difficult to do this without being slow and tedious. I don't know if I succeeded or not. I had to work on that problem constantly to keep the story line from appearing to sag and go nowhere. It had to have some forward motion. It had to have some draft. That's a technical problem: by the pure force of the writing to create a sense of involvement in real events. Also, the problem of how to get the essence of the lives of the four main characters into the space of one day is not small. I had done something like that before but never in such a concentrated way. In making fiction, one of the things a writer must do is to make absolutely certain that he knows the mind he's dealing *through*. In *Recapitulation*, I was dealing in third-person narration, but through a particular memory and a particular mind. In *Crossing to Safety*, I'm dealing in first-person; I have to try to become that person as far as possible. If I succeed, I get the tone of voice and the quality of mind that will persuade a reader to see and hear a real and credible human being, not a mouthpiece or a construct. As Henry James said, if fiction is going to be successful, it depends helplessly upon that sense of reality.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

You have to convince the reader that the world that he or she is entering is the real world and not the world of dream or memory only. Is that it?

STEGNER

I believe the real world exists. I haven't any philosophical doubts about that. Moreover, before you can convince the reader, you have to convince yourself that, in effect, you have invaded and become the person you're speaking through. Every morning you have to read over what you did yesterday, and if it doesn't persuade you, it has to be redone. Sometimes it takes me three hours in the morning to get over the feeling that I've been wasting my time for the past week and that everything I've written up to that point is drivel. Until I can convince myself that I am speaking in the plausible, believable voice of the person I have invented, I can't go on. So the first job is to convince yourself, the second is to convince the reader. If you do the first, the second more or less follows.

INTERVIEWER

Can we properly speak of traditional forms in fiction in the same sense that we can speak of traditional forms in poetry?

STEGNER

Sonnets and rondels? No. But it seems to me that every story has its own form, which can't be imposed upon the material but must be discovered within it. I don't believe, for instance, in such a thing as an all-inclusive form at all. I don't think there is such a thing in philosophy, either. I don't believe in method-makers, system-makers; it doesn't seem to me that life conforms to systems. Only systems conform to systems. The people who feel compelled to make systems, whether out of philosophy or out of human life, or out of words, are deluding themselves. I would rather follow the flow of life as it happens than of life as I can imagine it to be. I don't think straight-jackets are the way to get at fiction. I would rather define the novel as Stendhal did, as a mirror in the roadway.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whatever happens in the road is going to happen in the mirror, too. You can't systematize that.

INTERVIEWER

What is originality in fiction?

STEGNER

It's often thought to be technical innovation, experimentation of one kind or another, which never intrigued me. Whatever originality is, you can tell when it *isn't* there. If everything in a story can be anticipated from the start, if the writer begins with a situation and the story develops and concludes in absolutely anticipated ways, then I would say it is unoriginal. The writer is following a pattern practically imprinted on the material. Some element of the unexpected is necessary, or some element, at least, of the—what would you call it?—profound. For a writer to be original, he or she would have to see deeply enough into characters to say something that makes a reader really pause, something the reader might never have thought of at that point in the fiction. And ultimately, the writer would have to make the reader go the writer's way, too.

INTERVIEWER

Both John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and your *Angle of Repose* employ similar narrative techniques, some we had not seen in the novel for perhaps as long as a century.

STEGNER

They are both traditional, which doesn't bother me one bit. I don't really aspire to write a novel that can be read backward as well as forward, that turns chronology on its head, has no continuity, no narrative, that, in effect, tries to create a novel by throwing all the pieces in a bag and shaking it. If a writer has to do *that* to be original, then I don't care about being original. In fact, I don't think the word "originality," as it's usually defined, is particularly useful. It usually seizes upon some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

innovation that often turns out to be frivolous or essentially unimportant. An awful lot of mutations, which is what these things are, turn out to be monsters that can't live. I'm content with the species, with turning out two-legged animals with one head.

INTERVIEWER

Judging by the whole body of your fiction, you seem to me a highly self-conscious novelist. I mean that as a compliment.

STEGNER

That depends on what you mean by "self-conscious." I'm not careless, and I don't like to write things that fail to cast any shadow at all. On the other hand, I do, as I said, like to follow the flow of what I perceive to be the reality of observed life. I don't like to risk messing with that. If I'm lucky, things will come together.

INTERVIEWER

How much of your fiction is autobiographical? You are often taken for your fictional narrators, Joe Allston and Lyman Ward in particular.

STEGNER

What does Wallace Stegner have to do with it? The very fact that some of my experience goes into the book is all but inescapable, and true for almost any writer I can name. Which is real and which invented is (a) nobody's business and (b) a rather silly preoccupation and (c) impossible to answer. By the time I'm through converting my life to fiction, it's half fiction at least and maybe more. People still come to me and say, "Oh, it's too bad about your son who drowned in that surfing accident." Because some of *All the Little Live Things* reflects my immediate circumstances, they assume all of it does. People ought to learn to read better than that. The kind of *roman à clef* reading determining biographical facts in fiction is not a good way to read. Read the fiction. The life, like all kinds

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of other things, is just raw material for the fiction. In so far as the life is usable, it's used; in so far as it's unusable, something else is used. When I get through a book that involves some aspects of my own experience, as this new one does, I often don't know myself what I invented and what I didn't.

INTERVIEWER

Is that because you have made the experience real?

STEGNER

It's because I have thought my way into it in fictional terms. I never want the end product to be taken as autobiography or biography. Because it isn't. No, the moment I begin to say, "This fictional person is so-and-so," I am lying through my teeth. My fictional people are no more real people than Larry Morgan is me. They are constructs with some relations and roots in real life, but they are certainly not people. If I said they *were* people, real people would begin to say, "Well, you did me wrong." And they would have every reason to say so. But as long as my characters are constructs and understood to be such, I have only borrowed, shall we say, some characteristics and experience for fictional purposes—and I hope transformed them.

INTERVIEWER

My own limited experience in creating fiction tells me I have no choice but to draw upon my own experience as well as that of my friends, parents, children, if I am going to shape character. I sometimes feel as if I am stealing.

STEGNER

You can't steal anything that's already yours—in a literary sense. If you can surround it, understand it, comprehend it, it's yours unless you steal word for word—which is another matter. If the material is yours and it fits your concepts and the growing pattern in a novel, then it's already yours.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

How important are literary friendships? How important are friends to a writer?

STEGNER

I would hate to think that friends were simply purpose-servers, utilitarian. There's no question at all that literary conversation with people who know what they're talking about and whose books you have read, with whom you have some kind of friendly occupational relationship, is important. When you read a book you're bound to get a closer glimpse of people than a lot of the glimpses you get in real life. And so literary conversation, the companionship of people of like minds, is very pleasurable. I wouldn't want to think of it strictly as a useful business, although once in a while it happens that way. Malcolm Cowley helped me a time or two just with his wisdom.

INTERVIEWER

Did you consider him a friend?

STEGNER

Oh, yes. One of the best. I was writing *Wolf Willow*, and I couldn't make it come together. It was an anthology in the first place. Malcolm said, "Let me look at it," which was very friendly of him, and he looked and he said, "You know, I think if you just move this 'Dump Ground' chapter from the beginning to the end"—or vice versa, I've forgotten which—"the book will come together better." And it did, like a puzzle when you find the key piece. I had a blind spot he did not have. So there is often a great usefulness in literary friends, but that isn't what you have them for. You don't have any friend *for* anything. You just have him. Or her.

INTERVIEWER

What others do you think of as literary friends?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STEGNER

I don't have many because I haven't lived a literary life. Most writers either live in New York or in their own pieces of the hinterlands. Frank O'Connor was a good and close friend. So was Storm Jameson. But most of my literary friends are friendly acquaintances or ex-students—a separate category.

INTERVIEWER

Do the women in your fiction seem to you stronger than the men? Doesn't your fiction address this question frequently? By "stronger" I mean physiologically as well as psychologically. I'm thinking, too, of one of your critics—a man—who claims your novels *use* women but are ultimately *about* men.

STEGNER

I wouldn't think such a generalization would be easy. There are some women in my fiction, like the discombobulated woman in *A Shooting Star*, who are not strong characters. I've known a lot of women, particularly in the more distant past, back a way: attractive, well-educated, with nothing to do. Simply brought up and well-educated to a dead-end. Society wives. That kind often ends up alcoholic or something else self-destructive. They can't be called strong characters.

I think Elsa in *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, who has a good many qualities in common with my mother, is a strong character, stronger than her husband who is a lot more active and in some ways more imaginative. In *Angle of Repose* I would guess that it's a stand-off. Susan is more talented in many ways than Oliver. She shows off better. But while I wrote that book, thinking that I was writing about her as a heroine, I came to the end of it thinking maybe *he* is the hero because there is a flaw in her, a flaw of snobbery. She doesn't adequately appreciate the kind of person he is, or the kind of work he does. That's a story not about either men or women, but about a relationship, a novel about a marriage.

I have been lucky, in some ways, writing about women. My

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mother was a very strong woman, and I got an example of the kind of patience and endurance that even an unlucky woman can display. And I was lucky in writing *Angle of Repose* because the record was so complete. I couldn't have been a Victorian gentlewoman without taking a lot of material out of the letters of Mary Hallock Foote, who was, in her way, a quite remarkable character. Women sometimes ask me, "How do you know so much about women?" I don't know anything about women. I'm writing about people. It's not as if only women can write about women or men about men. After all, neither *Madame Bovary* nor *Anna Karenina* was written by a woman. I know novels about men written by women that are perfectly strong and true. I don't want to dismiss the sexes or dismantle them. I just don't want to choose between them.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a point where a writer's consciousness ought to take over his intuitive responses, when the character begins to cast a longer shadow on the page and assume symbolic values? I'm thinking of the evolutionary process: first by accident, then by design.

STEGNER

Oh, I suppose. Again, I would insist that those patterns are discovered and not imposed. When a writer finds them he helps them along. You would be foolish not to play any scene that is given to you to play. Benny DeVoto said, in effect, "You run out your hits as far as you can. You don't stop on second." But the author's consciousness certainly ought never to be obvious. It's imposed, of course it's imposed. But the author's view of his own characters may be arrived at through a long period of inductive thinking about them. You don't put placards up for the reader saying, "This is my meaning."

The whole business of writing is an attempt to arrive at truth, insofar as you can see it, as far as your capacity to unearth it permits. Truth is to be handled gingerly. That's an egg with a very thin shell. I'm not writing fables—where the moral is literally part of the form. I'm writing something from which

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the reader is supposed to deduce or induce any moral that's there. The moral value ought to be hiding in the material.

INTERVIEWER

The last time we spoke I pointed out to you a few of the interpretive possibilities for the first name of your narrator, Lyman, in *Angle of Repose*; "Lie-Man," I exclaimed, "What a wonderful name for a storyteller." You denied making any conscious association.

STEGNER

I never thought of that pun on Lyman's name until you suggested it to me, so if it was unconscious on my part, it was *totally* unconscious. Such things seem to me a form of gamesmanship and pedantry I really don't want to play. *Lang*, for instance, in the new novel is just a name. I don't know where that came from. I wanted a Scottish name. It came, I suppose, because I happened to run across Andrew Lang, a translator of certain Greek classics. "Lang" is just a Scotch name. It might as well have been McDermit.

INTERVIEWER

But it wasn't McDermit! It was *Lang*. What about the name *Ward*, the family name in *Angle of Repose*? Lyman, the narrator, and his whole family are literally orphans. Lyman considers himself both a cultural guardian and watchman, as well as a dependent. He, at least, is aware of himself as a *ward*.

STEGNER

Well, I suppose I'm entitled to anything you can find in me. I'll accept that. But I'm certainly not doing anything like that on purpose. If I were Vladimir Nabokov, that's the kind of game I might play. I'm a very different kind of writer.

INTERVIEWER

Will you comment on the way you choose the names of your fictional characters?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STEGNER

Sure. Which ones?

INTERVIEWER

Well, how about Lyman Ward?

STEGNER

While I hate to lose credit for ingenuity, I have to say that most of my characters' names are pure accident. I probably named him Lyman because the president of Stanford at the time was named Dick Lyman, and I borrowed his name. Ward? I don't know where I picked up Ward except for Julia Ward Howe and other people related to my historical models. I wanted an old, eastern, established name. Even though Ward came a little close to some of the ancestors of the people I used as models, I still felt it was legitimate. It wasn't the name of either family. It was on a collateral edge of one of the families. I guess that's where that name comes from, but I also wanted to use the fellow in Leadville, the wizard of Wall Street, the man who broke Ulysses Grant and more or less disgraced him.

INTERVIEWER

Who was that?

STEGNER

W.S. Ward. He appears in the book just briefly as a foil for the relatively square, unimaginative integrity of his cousin.

INTERVIEWER

It must be outright unnerving to write a book like *Angle of Repose* and then watch the *New York Times* ignore it, even when the Pulitzer committee nods benevolently. What do you do then?

STEGNER

I was made aware of the situation by all kinds of friends of mine, including many in the East, who kept writing to the *Times* and saying, "When are you going to review this book,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because it's a book we admire very much?" Eventually, months later, the *Times* ran a retrospective review, which was a little condescending, and kind of snobby. I don't know. The reasons they ignored it could have been personal. Wright Morris and I talk about which one of us is the more neglected. We compete for the role. Neither of us wants it.

INTERVIEWER

But then, after *Angle of Repose*, you published *The Spectator Bird* and won a National Book Award. Did the *Times* review it?

STEGNER

No. They didn't. But that's all water under the bridge. Let's not bring on anything with a rain dance. The *Los Angeles Times* didn't review *The Spectator Bird*, either. That, I found out later, was because Robert Kirsch, the book editor, was abroad and terminally ill, and somebody in his place just overlooked it. I wouldn't make a case for the *Los Angeles Times* being unfriendly, because they have been friendly. They've given me a prize. These things seldom happen through calculated neglect.

INTERVIEWER

You once claimed in an essay published in *The Sound of Mountain Water* that a publisher's map of the United States would look like a barbell: New York at one end, California at the other, and United Airlines in between. Does that comparison still hold?

STEGNER

The publishing world used to be a narrow world, pinched between about Thirty-third and Sixty-fifth Streets and between Third Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas. That world has widened in recent years as regional and university presses have enlarged their activities. Though the New York skyline still obscures the view to some extent, publishers certainly do know that the West Coast exists, and some have even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

discovered the interior West. The concentration of publishing, the reviews, and the advertising industry in New York makes New York indisputably the center, but it's less necessary than it used to be to live in New York, or to make frequent visits, if you want to be a writer. It is possible—not optimal but possible—to live a long way from the center and not get lost.

Twenty years ago I could not have said that, probably. I taught at Harvard for a half-dozen years in the 1940s, and because of the proximity to New York I felt more a part of the literary world than I have ever felt since moving back west. Personal contacts, acquaintances, visibility, all have practical usefulness. But they are not now as absolutely essential as they were then. The principal danger is that, like a character in a radio play who says nothing for a minute or two, you may disappear.

INTERVIEWER

When you say it is useful for a writer to be visible, what do you mean?

STEGNER

For practical purposes, to be visible to editors, publishers, critics, agents, and for the possibilities of personal growth and stimulation, to other writers. Not being in New York means not knowing, or at least not seeing regularly, some of the best and brightest people in the world, people who might take can-openers to your mind, the kind of people who give off sparks when struck.

INTERVIEWER

Are you speaking about fruitful cultural differences?

STEGNER

Of course. I am probably going to look provincial to a born-and-bred New Yorker. He is probably going to look parochial to me. We need each other as correctives. For just one thing: cliques tend to form, coteries, fads, mind-sets, coagulations of ideas. Inevitably, we in the West are farther from Europe; the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

examples and stimulations that come from there are pretty attenuated after crossing the Atlantic and the North American continent. Just as surely, New York is farther from Asia than we are. Sitting on the edge of the Pacific Basin, we see aspects of the future, and we hear the sounds of alien ideas that are less apparent farther East. And we hear the interior of the continent more plainly. But the main problem is that the prestigious review journals come out of New York, and they tend to ignore what they can't hear, or to review it less seriously.

INTERVIEWER

Can we talk about the question of age and writing well? Conrad started at forty. Hardy, of course, wrote his best poetry—

STEGNER

After *Jude the Obscure*. I don't know anybody in this country who's writing fiction at a really advanced age and still writing well. Robert Penn Warren was very productive in poetry. Malcolm Cowley went on producing books, too, but his health and energy finally ran down. There are a few. Sophocles wrote *Oedipus at Colonus* when he was ninety. Goethe finished *Faust* when he was very old. But those were people with remarkable vigor and stamina, and most were not writing fiction. Not just anybody can do it. Some people are senile at sixty, some at twenty.

INTERVIEWER

What about you?

STEGNER

When I was in my prime, so to speak, I would generally get anywhere from three to five or six pages a day, stuff that might have to be rewritten tomorrow, but that would essentially stay. That doesn't happen now. It takes more combing to do it now.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps you're only being a more cantankerous and harsher

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

critic, more difficult to please. You once told me that the critic inside the writer ought to come to the work at a "different hour" than the creator and scribe.

STEGNER

Well, I still think that's true. It's important to *get on* with the writing, particularly when you're young and you can hardly wait to get down to work because you're boiling with something. But I'm not boiling that hard anymore. The critic is taking charge, and I'm just driving the cab. That's why it takes me so much longer now.

INTERVIEWER

Are there no advantages to age for a writer?

STEGNER

Oh, of course there are. There are even advantages to being fifty years in the business of writing books, because one hand has a tendency to wash the other. People know one book and get reminded of another. A reputation is, to some extent, a cumulative affair. I suppose that's the best kind of reputation, one you've earned over a long period of time. That's the kind I would covet, if I were coveting.

INTERVIEWER

Are there no other advantages of age? Even if you only end up keeping one page a day you can easily have a book every year or every other year.

STEGNER

Yes, one page would be pretty good. There are advantages. You should know more. You should be able to estimate people better. You should have, if not a more mellow, at least a less distorted view of the world. But a lot of the business of writing books is, as Hemingway said, selling energy. The disadvantage of age is that your energy level goes down. You have less to sell. And eventually the level goes down so far you haven't any to sell, and you quit writing books.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

I've heard this before. The last time we spoke you told me, "I don't know if I'm going to have another novel."

STEGNER

Well, all right. I'll go on like a fool until I'm ninety—and then wish I hadn't written the last three. There are other things that happen when you get to be my age. Literary fashions change, leaving you stranded. Still, at my age you care less. You just plain care less. You get tired of people's problems, and you take less interest in them. You think, "Oh, to hell with them. I'll go out and tend to the garden." The kinds of problems you can care about in your old age are different from the kinds of problems you care about when you're thirty. And they are probably different from the kinds of problems most of your readers care about. So you tend to move away from all the heat and calamity of living and get into a kind of serenity that is not very creative.

INTERVIEWER

That's one option. If you could literally go back and change anything, would you do it?

STEGNER

Oh, I don't know. It's a kind of fruitless speculation, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

Maybe. Not necessarily for a novelist, I would think.

STEGNER

If I could go back? There are many, many things I would do differently if I could go back. Of course. I would go back and study different things. If we're in the self-improvement business, which we seem to be on the basis of this last book, there are many ways I could improve myself.

INTERVIEWER

You would study biology and anthropology.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STEGNER

I would study both of those. I would waste far less time.

INTERVIEWER

You've produced fifty or more books in as many years. Where did you waste a second of time and when?

STEGNER

I'm thinking up to the time I was about twenty—twenty-two, maybe—no, twenty. You waste your youth. I wasted mine working too much. I fiddled. I played a lot of cards, for one thing . . . like Solo. I spent a lot of time reaching for "spread misères." It's a lay-down hand in Solo. "'I guess I'll make it a spread misère,' said Dangerous Dan McGrew." I suppose I didn't waste a lot of time, but I was a frivolous youth. I really was.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't that what youth is for?

STEGNER

It doesn't seem so. I had plenty of reasons to be serious. If I could go back, I would waste less. And I would waste less of it at frivolous and unproductive work. I worked my way through college being a clerk in a rug and linoleum store forty hours a week. There was nothing in that work that taught me anything. I did it for a long time—and was glad to do it because it was the only way to go to school. If I were going back I'd find some other way. There were so many books I wanted to know and would know now if I hadn't worked those forty-hour weeks, four years of my life.

INTERVIEWER

Do you recall these words? "Nobody has quite made a western Yoknapatawpha County or discovered a historical continuity comparable to that which Faulkner traced from Ikkemotubbe the Chickasaw to Montgomery Ward Snopes. Maybe it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

isn't possible, but I wish someone would try. I might even try myself." Haven't you been trying?

STEGNER

Not systematically, no. When I wrote that statement, sometime in the fifties maybe, I was wishing that somebody could do it; I suppose I was aware that in many people's eyes, and perhaps in my own, I was becoming a western writer; I was curious to know what that meant, curious to know if it was some kind of fence I was stuck inside of. If I was going to be stuck inside the fence, what was I going to do with the territory in there? I pretty well decided, then or later, that the territory was a little too vast and various, that you couldn't make a Yoknapatawpha County out of it. There was not enough homogeneity in the material.

I don't know how systematic Faulkner was in writing the Yoknapatawpha County books; I suspect he wasn't a systematic kind of man. But he was dealing with material that was homogeneous, that related one book to another through three generations of a family of characters. In the West, there is not that kind of continuity to deal with, even if I wanted to. If I had been tempted to try to make some kind of saga like that, I couldn't possibly have done it without confining myself to a particular part of the West, Salt Lake City, say, or Saskatchewan, Montana, parts of the West I knew. Here again we run into the lack of a usable past. There wasn't enough in those places to produce that kind of saga—I thought. So, I'm scattered. Even when I'm writing about the things I know, I'm inevitably scattered. The only related things I was able to do were a trailer to *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in *Recapitulation*, two Joe Allston books, and another little Joe Allston novella about this part of contemporary California. Those are not sagas. They are only minimal crystallizations and coagulations. All of Faulkner's people tend to revolve around the courthouse square, the Confederate monument. It's a different, much more concentrated country in the South. It's a rural tradition with a relatively homogeneous population, homoge-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

neous problems—the problem of slavery and its consequences; it's a rural society and notably traditional.

INTERVIEWER

One of your critics writes, "Stegner reminds me of Faulkner, a mythologizer notoriously unreliable in his comments about his own work. . . . Stegner treats myth and tradition as does Faulkner, who uses them in terms which absolutely surround them and encompass them and melt them down and make them into something else . . . [who] transcends and transforms his tradition."

STEGNER

It would be nice to think I have all those powers. I don't understand, really, what the critic is talking about. I am, so far as I know, unaware of myth in my work—notoriously unreliable as I am. Again, if these things are found in my fiction, I'm happy. I have been, as you suggest, trying to make a historical continuity between past and present, but I don't understand that as myth. I don't believe the myth matches either past or present. The mythic western is pure hokum. It applies to very small numbers of people over very short periods of time and not at all to nine-tenths of the people who lived here—as a personification of Individualism and Self-Reliance. I guess I like things that are closer to the actual facts of experience.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been conscious of attempting to debunk the myths, statements like "Rain follows the plow" or "Gold is anywhere you stick your shovel"?

STEGNER

I'd call those delusions, not myths; but sure, I grew up doubting the Big-Bonanza-Just-Over-the-Next-Rise notion, because for years I watched my family chase it. I got pretty jaundiced on that subject. A little realism would have helped my family a good deal. Instead of expecting to make a big strike somewhere, which is a very American notion, encour-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aged by free land, by opportunity, by freedom of action or nearly complete freedom of action, I would have liked to see a little more just plain stick-to-itiveness at times. The longest journey begins with a single step—I believe that more than I believe in the fortune over the next rise. My father always refused to make the first step. He always wanted the step to be a one-hundred-yard broad-jump. Broad-jumping is not the way you travel. It leads to a succession of falls.

INTERVIEWER

Is it possible for a writer to open up "new" territory for fiction?

STEGNER

"No new ways to be new," as Frost said. I think that's a reasonably good statement. "There's nothing new under the sun," sayeth the Preacher. "All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full." I think more circularly than linearly. I don't think there are beginnings and destinations so much as circles which end by closing and starting over again. I can't think of any fiction that introduces new elements of what used to be called "Human Nature," nothing that isn't present, say, in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The qualities of character, the machinery of suspense and climax, of mounting action and falling action: I don't think we've seen anything new in that way. There are new clothes, because civilization can change, and we get out of armor and into doublet and hose, and then Brooks Brothers pants, but we're still the same people, and doing the same things essentially. I think it's a mistake to think originality amounts to that much.

I know people, for instance, including former students of mine, who got into the sexual revolution and thought they had opened up really new material for fiction. They felt like renaissance men and women discovering a new world with fifty-seven positions. But it's there in *One Thousand and One Nights*, it's there in the *Satyricon* of Petronius. There's nothing new about it. I doubt there's much Cain didn't know as soon as he got acquainted east of Eden. I don't think that's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a way of getting anywhere: to pretend that there's anything new to be said. What's important is a larger understanding of what has always been. I believe some things have been added in that respect.

INTERVIEWER

Like what?

STEGNER

Many would say depth psychology has given us both new soil and new tools. I'm not sure. I've never seen an Id—and I will run in another direction if I ever do! Freud's theory of the personality doesn't always strike me as plausible. I'm half-inclined to agree with Nabokov on the subject of Freud: a great witch-doctor. I would say that I doubt psychoanalysis has produced many cures, though it has produced a good many novels.

I don't mean to say the species is absolutely incapable of change. But often what we change to may have already been there, but neglected. Aldo Leopold's American land ethic is, in some ways, for example, prefigured in Stoic philosophy. Marcus Aurelius: "What's bad for the beehive can't be good for the bee." It's certainly there in Saint Francis, in Zen, in American Indian religions: that attitude toward the earth that is respectful and reverent, that goes *with* the flow of the earth instead of against it. If we all adopted Leopold's land ethic tomorrow we would not be doing anything new. We might be going in a different direction from the one we're headed toward, but it wouldn't be a new direction, only a change of direction, one already inscribed in the books.

INTERVIEWER

Is it possible for a writer to protect the places he or she loves by writing about them?

STEGNER

It doesn't help to write about them in celebratory ways because all you do is stimulate the tourist industry. I have some-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

times carefully avoided writing in celebratory ways about places I love on the earth. On the other hand, you can write, as Leopold did, about attitudes toward the earth and do some educating. The problem is not wickedness or evil. Lynn White calls it a development of the Judeo-Christian tradition which makes man the center of the earth and all creatures subservient to him. The problem, as stated in Genesis, is a piece of early Jewish arrogance. But many peoples have felt it. The Navajo call themselves Diné, The People. Many, many people have called themselves *the* people, as if no other people existed, and have thought of themselves as the center of the universe. We have to get over that. I am profoundly of the opinion that *that* attitude has to go or we destroy our own habitat. So without innovating anything, I would just rather get a little more American Indian than Judeo-Christian in my attitudes toward the earth, and a little more Zen and Saint Francis-like in my attitude toward other animals.

INTERVIEWER

You've observed that the "new man" Crèvecoeur defined had become something else by the time Henry James got around to writing *The American*. Is there anything you can tell us that might help the species survive?

STEGNER

Crèvecoeur's notion is touched by the Rousseauvian idea of the naturally good human being given new opportunity. And new opportunity—Crèvecoeur never got around to saying this—is often abused. People take advantage of it to extend beyond their normal appetites. Wendell Berry was right when he said we've gone about as far as we *can* go with that American notion, the new man in a new country. It's time to change direction and quit thinking of the American as simply an animated economic opportunity. That's Ronald Reagan's way of looking at America. I'm profoundly opposed to enterprise when enterprise is uncontrolled by any notion of the public good, of the *polis*, the way in which people relate one to another. Instead, we find Individualism gone berserk. I don't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

know if you're familiar with a book by Robert N. Bellah called *Habits of the Heart*, the title of which comes from Tocqueville. It's an examination of American attitudes, of Individualism without what Wendell Berry calls "membership," without association, without a notion of a *polis*. According to Bellah, Individualism often results in a lifestyle that changes as often as the coat or tie, the absolute repudiation of commitment or obligation to anything. You're not obligated by religion, you're not obligated by a social conscience, you're not obligated by family: you change your family, you get a divorce and start over. You're not even obligated to stay with one sex. You're absolutely free. And absolutely, it seems to me, in a vacuum. I would agree with Bellah: that kind of Individualism gone berserk, gone rampant, leads down to some cold ninth circle of hell. That's no way for any people to continue to live. We had better get over precisely the kind of thing Ronald Reagan urges us to get back to.

INTERVIEWER

You also wave a hand of dismissal to the whole idea that T.H. Watkins raises in a recent article: that you've been one of "the central figures in the modern conservation movement." You worked for Stewart Udall in the Kennedy administration; before that as an active freelancer in Bernard DeVoto's camp; and you've been on the Advisory Board for National Parks, Historical Sites, Buildings and Monuments as well as on the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society.

STEGNER

I told Tom Watkins, "I am not a good soldier in the environmental armies because I don't seem to work well in bodies with other people." Here's an irony. I'm against Individualism gone rampant, but I don't actually seem to be a very good team player. I become recalcitrant. Even when I agree wholeheartedly with the people who are urging me along, I don't like to be pushed. So some of the work of conservation, which is by necessity touched with zealotry, I resist. I'm not fooling when I tell Tom I'm not really a good team player. I have the com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

plete conviction and conversion, but I seem to have to do it on my own. That means I write when I feel it and not when the tactics of the moment call for it.

I have been unable to bring much of my thought about conservation into fiction because I suspect myself when I begin to be doctrinaire. I consider the integrity of the material to be of greater value than any message I might want to get across. If the material itself dictates that message, it would be in there, but I don't seem to be able to put it in by force or will: that seems to me a dilution of the essential.

INTERVIEWER

But it does surface. Plenty of public servants turn up: John Wesley Powell, for instance, and there are plenty of examples in your DeVoto biography. Bruce Mason is a public servant. Oliver Ward has a kind of civic-mindedness.

STEGNER

Oliver's notion of how to be a public servant in the West was mistaken, but he did have the notion of public service. His notion was to build a dam that he hoped would do a lot of good. Well, I happen to be an anti-dam man, so I have to go against my own character in a way. Oliver is not a Bo Mason, but neither is he a Powell. Even Powell I would have to disagree with on certain things because he didn't live long enough to see what the development of the dry country would do to it.

INTERVIEWER

What's the most difficult thing to teach about writing? And what's the most difficult thing for students to learn?

STEGNER

Assuming that the student is at a stage where he is still teachable—there *is* a time when you shouldn't try to teach him, when he is technically proficient and subtle and has his own ways for going about what he wants to say—one of the hardest things to teach him is *Revise*! *Revise*! *Revise*! And they *won't* revise, often. Many of them would rather write a new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

book than revise the old one. Revision is what separates the men from the boys. Sooner or later, you've got to learn to revise. On the other hand, there's occasionally somebody like Bob Stone, who won the National Book Award for *Dog Soldiers*. Quite wacky, really. Quite mad. He got the notion in the middle of the year that he had a brain tumor. He came in and sat across from my desk and big drops of sweat formed on his forehead. "I'm going blind!" he said, scared to death. He had just used up his fellowship. So I quickly reinstated his fellowship so that he could get free medical care. He swore later they bored a hole into his head and blew him out with a pressure hose, but they didn't find any brain tumor. He came bald-headed to a party when Bill Styron was there talking. But Stone was someone you couldn't teach *not* to revise. He was so finicky that it would take him a term to produce a chapter. He would be working on it all the time, but he wouldn't really let anybody see it until it satisfied him completely. He's an exception, though, and a very good writer.

INTERVIEWER

If you were to outline a course of study for a writer at the outset of his undergraduate career, what would it include? Or is the question too broad?

STEGNER

That's pretty broad. It might be different for every individual. I would ask some questions. I suppose I would ask, "Are you a reader?" If you aren't a reader, you might as well forget trying to be a writer. I don't think it's necessary to take a lot of courses in English literature. I sound prejudiced against the English Departments, but in a sense, if you had some kind of guidance, if you had a tutor who could suggest books for you to read, it would be better, I think, than taking regular English Department courses. To know something substantive, to have some kind of skill, some body of knowledge, is terribly useful. I don't care what it is. It will be useful in writing sooner or later. If you only play tennis well, if you're a doctor—whatever you do. I know what I would do if I were do-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing it again. I would take courses in biology and anthropology, though that's my particular bias. Whatever your choice, there's no substitute for knowing something. As Benny DeVoto once said in a dour martini-lit moment, "Literary people always tend to overbid their knowledge." At the same time, while you're learning something, I suspect that you should keep writing. Use it or lose it. Creation is a knack which is improved by practice, and like almost any skill, it is lost if you don't practice it.

INTERVIEWER

Is the proliferation of creative writing programs on the nation's campuses in any way dangerous?

STEGNER

Yes. It's dangerous because, if you'll pardon the expression, a lot of people in English Departments should never be trusted to run a program. Their training is all in the other direction, all analytical, all critical. It's all a reader's training, not a writer's training, so they have no notion of how to approach the opportunity.

INTERVIEWER

During some of the years you taught at Stanford, you shared the corridors with Yvor Winters, a formidable critic. Former students like Ed Loomis say they were "very much aware of dominions and borders that were taken very seriously in these little intellectual baronies. There was a certain amount of distrust—or perhaps dislike would be a more accurate characterization."

STEGNER

Yvor Winters was, as you say, a formidable critic, positive and often unyielding in his opinions, and intolerant of ideas that conflicted with his. He was not a man you could debate with, because he never debated, he asserted. On the other hand, he was learned, utterly serious, and a devoted teacher to those with whom he could work, and who could work with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him. We had our differences, which were never mortal, and we generally operated, as Ed Loomis suggests, by a division of territory. Yvor kept his poets close, away from contamination, with the result, which I never liked, that poets and fiction writers had too little contact. That situation has not applied since Yvor's retirement and death, and so far as I am able to observe, poets and fiction writers mix and blend and influence one another in the present-day program.

INTERVIEWER

As a nation, are we pursuing the best course by subsidizing fiction writers and poets and the publication of their work through the auspices of the National Endowment?

STEGNER

I suppose it could be said that arts that require public support don't justify themselves, and should be allowed to wither. But the arts have always needed support, because they are a product of a highly evolved society with plenty of leisure, and few of them can count on a mass audience big enough to keep them solvent and flourishing. I have no difficulty with the spectacle of the federal government playing modest Maecenas. After all, when I was breaking in, there was outright support for the arts through WPA, essentially a welfare program. The only problem is that a leaky tap will always attract lapping tongues. Any fellowship program, even such university programs as Stanford's, must keep a careful eye out for plausible fellowship lushes. Fellowships are best applied to young writers with big ambitions, to help them over the first hump. I don't know the hazards of other arts—I suspect composers have it worst—but any beginning artist needs time to develop, and fellowships, federal or otherwise, buy him time.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do when you simply want to relax—apart from reading and writing, teaching and lecturing, stumping for conservation?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STEGNER

Walking, reading, gardening. I am past tennis because of a shoulder separation, past skiing because I hate the cold, and past being a beach bum for obvious reasons.

INTERVIEWER

What role has your wife, Mary Stuart Page, played in your life and career?

STEGNER

She has had no role in my life except to keep me sane, fed, housed, amused, and protected from unwanted telephone calls; also to restrain me fairly frequently from making a horse's ass of myself in public, to force me to attend to books and ideas from which she knows I will learn something; also to mend my wounds when I am misused by the world, to implant ideas in my head and stir the soil around them, to keep me from falling into a comfortable torpor, to agitate my waking hours with problems that I would not otherwise attend to; also to remind me constantly—not by precept but by example—how fortunate I have been to live for fifty-six years with a woman that bright, alert, charming, and supportive.

INTERVIEWER

Another great American writer once wrote, "Death is the mother of beauty, mystical/ Within whose burning bosom we devise/ Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly." Is one life ever enough?

STEGNER

I would like to think that one life is enough, and that when I see it coming to an end I can meet the darkness with resignation and perhaps acceptance. I have been lucky. I came from nowhere, and had no reason to expect as much from this one life as I have got. I owe God a death, and the earth a pound or so of chemicals. Now let's see if I can remember that when the time comes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

In your only formal statement on your personal beliefs, you write, "I am terribly glad to be alive; and when I have wit enough to think about it, terribly proud to be a man and an American, with all the rights and privileges that those words connote; and most of all I am humble before the responsibilities that are also mine. For no right comes without a responsibility, and being born luckier than most of the world's millions, I am also born more obligated." What new obligations and responsibilities do you feel confronting you now? Or are there any?

STEGNER

No new ones—haven't we agreed with Frost that there are no new ways to be new?—but only reiterated and intensified versions of the old ones: the obligation to use oneself to the bone, to be as good as one's endowments and circumstances let one be, to project one's actions over and beyond the personal. The only things I owe to myself, I owe to my notions of justice. But I owe a great deal, in the way not only of obligation but of tenderness, to my family and my friends. Chekhov said he worked all his life to get the slave out of himself. I guess I feel my obligation is to get the selfishness and greed, which often translates as the Americanism, out of myself. I want to be a citizen of the culture, of the best the culture stands for, not of a nation or a party or an economic system.

—**James R. Hepworth**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Portable People

Paul West

JOHN WILLIAM POLIDORI

Lord Byron's doctor and traveling companion, John Polidori, was dead by his own hand at twenty-six, having taken a potion he himself had brewed, based on prussic acid; but then, all through his time in Europe as part of Byron's entourage, he had been trying out one form of suicide or another. He was a man perpetually on the edge, almost a *maudit*, and his manner– alternating between sulks and effusive silliness– early on began to provoke Byron beyond endurance (he several times thought of killing him off, either by drowning or in a duel). Polidori was a prodigy, the youngest man ever to receive a medical degree from Edinburgh University, and he came from an artistic family: his father had translated *The Castle of Otranto* into Italian, and he was the uncle of the future Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti. At first he amused Byron and had so earned the honor of traveling as a near-equal with the most famous man in England. He had also been promised five hundred guineas by Byron's publisher, John Murray, for a full diary of Byron's doings while abroad. Polidori kept that diary, but was dissuaded from publishing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it. After his death, his aging sister ripped out of it what she thought the obscenest pages and allowed it into the world (it came out in 1911), but it is clear from what such initiates as William Michael Rossetti said that Polidori had set down every instance he had witnessed of Byron's sex life (Rossetti remembered a chambermaid raped in Ostend, for instance).

It is odd to think of a doctor in such a constant ferment of emotion, as full of malice and masochism as Polidori was, always bringing to the fore Byron's latent sadism. He used Polidori as a butt and Polidori seethed. He ridiculed his amours, his verse, his ideas, and even gossiped that something unholy was going on in Polidori's medical career: all his patients died, and he seemed more interested in dissection than in prophylaxis or cure. At one point, perhaps to get away from a medical scandal threatening in Italy, Polidori planned to go to Brazil, to make a fresh start on fresh meat, as Byron quipped, and it was clearly dangerous to entrust one's body to his flighty, devious hands.

An image builds of a man who, despite his levity and charm, was too highly strung for his own good: a plagiarist, a hanger-on, a climber, a satanist who was also a klutz and a social menace. The novelist Stendhal watched him getting arrested at the Milan Opera and left a long, detailed account of it, and Byron's tabletalk leaves one in no doubt as to the bickering that went on between the two of them. Eventually Byron had to let him go and paid him off. Polidori became a gambler and took his own life in August, 1821, upon which event Byron commented, "Poor Polly is gone."

IMELDA MARCOS

Miss Manila calling. She hears a dream, when it was wartime in the doghouse of the heart, although a garage is where she started, only nine, jammed in with Mamma Remedios and the other kids, next to the fumey clapped-out car, whose metal was a foretaste of the corrugated iron prefab in Leyte.

In one painting, where an oily tropic sky walks the full moon out from under its epidermis like a tumor of shrapnel,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she just touches his hand: the nail of her little finger taps his third knuckle, receiving the current. In the end, Manila's Four-Hundred accepted her, but never with the homesick fervor of the GI's to whom she crooned. Tried for Miss Manila. Sounds like an offense. Lost, having no money with which to win votes. So, as they say, she intervened personally with the mayor, and it was all right after that, apart from the weird games he liked to play with leeches. Then Ferdinand the Bull, the sawn-off nouveau riche living down a trial for murder, underpacked the rugs with so much moolah their heads rode ever nearer the ceilings. They were the only patients to whom doctors offered *quantity* of life. Retinue of seven hundred at the White House.

Fifty-seven, she competed for Miss Manila all over again, purring how contestant Aquino had no make-up, no manicure, whereas "Filipinos are for beauty. Filipinos who like beauty, love, and God are for Marcos." Could Cleopatra be a klutz? Never in all her lovely life did Miss Manila have a thousand breasts or six thousand feet.

FEODOR CHALIAPIN

My voice was such a Volga orgy, lardies unt gentleschnitches, zat, ven I sprang a title role, no longer ze burly peasant I once was, but *really Boris*, I could turn toward the wings and without breaking cadence or tone command my offstage servant "Go-oo to-oo thee Haut Elle art vance and breeng me the Vine Ay Four Gott." *Da*. They were listening to my face, much as, later, they worshipped at Stalin's mustache. On waxen cylinders I still rise from the mud like an Egyptian pharaoh, basso profundo dell tutto mondo. Yet where is my Chaliapinograd? Whose is my voice now?

AUGUSTE RODIN

God's dong, if such a thing can be, is a velvet hammer made of love that thumps the stars home, where they belong, in the moist pleat of the empyrean. Surely he needs no goading on,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unlike myself, finger-dipping each and every cleft of every model, and all that a mere preliminary to what goes on after the day's work is done, and we twist the big key clockwise. That is when I get my girls to tongue one another before my very eyes. It is almost as if the sculpting is mere prelude to the venery. By midnight, they are all going their ways, about their business, with Rodin syrup dribbling from them as they walk, like molten marble. Those who pose for me must taste my will, upended like ducks on a pond.

When my Balzac, now, strides forth with upright phallus in his fist, from behind he must be read as a giant lingam marching to India. I mean these burly semblances to stun, my Lord, as when, for Becque and sundry appreciative madams, I turn actor and behead with a sword the plaster statues arranged in front of me. Those who cry out, in abuse, "Rodin is a great big prick" are right. I am always and ever the policeman's son, neither peasant nor poet.

I receive on Sundays, as my copy of *The Guide to the Pleasures of Paris* says, married to that carthorse, Rose, who gave me a son with a broken brain, abandoned by Camille, who once adored me and now in the asylum murmurs, "So this is what I get for all I did." At least she, unlike my Yankee heiress Claire, fat and daubed and drunk, never kept leaving the dinner table to go and throw up, as now, or play her creaky gramophone while my public sits around me, hearing me tell them yet again that it was indeed I who stove in Isadora Duncan, pommeling that little earlike hole between her lively legs, and it was also I who, like the milkman delivering, brought her weekly orgasm to little sad Gwen John in her rented room. I snapped her like a wineglass stem, but made her coo all the same.

When I get Upstairs, His Nibs and I are going to go on such a masterful rampage the angels will cry to be raped, neuter as they are, and none shall contain us, we shall be so massive in our roistering, from the hand-gallop to the common swyve, with our humpbacked fists banged deep into the soft clay of eternity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NIKOLAI POLIKARPOV

We showed them off first in the May Day fly-past over Moscow in 1935, loud and stocky, their bodies like tapered barrels. The Polikarpov I-16 was a reasonably fast and swift-climbing fighter, capable of 323 m.p.h., and in the Spanish Civil War it often out-maneuvered the Messerschmidt Bf109B's. *Ishak*, we named it: Little Donkey, its thick back strong for the rod. Twenty thousand little donkeys we had, all told, and I am proud (though not exactly gibbering with delight) to have designed it. Whenever I see the plan view of it, I see not an airplane but the constellation Cygnus, with the same stubby nose, straight leading edge to the wings, forward-curved trailing edge as if plucked voluptuously after it, except that the constellation has a longer, narrower fuselage, between Eta and Albireo anyway. Is Cygnus the plane of my dreams, not quite attained in my own design, but designable somewhere by someone? Am I thinking of the Thunderbolt or Spitfire, instead, whose trailing edges had that half-elliptical, rapturous curve? What I have forgotten is that there is no need, not even a reason, to draw Cygnus so beautifully; a crude simplistic cross would link up the stars. There is no swan up there, no little donkey down here. It is all in our minds where, when we fly, we are truly being flown.

EDITH SITWELL

Once upon a train her father lowered his copy of the *Times*, looked at her, shuddered, and shut her out again. As an adolescent she wore what she called her Bastille: one piece, both brace and corset, to remedy a curvature of the spine and weak ankles; the other a facial brace to straighten out her long tuber of a Plantagenet nose. Her specialist, a Mr. Stout, looked like a statuette made in margarine then frozen stiff. Perhaps she felt much the same when out walking in Eckington woods, made to wear a veil lest the locals see how like a leper she was. Truly hurt into poetry (and into witty sarcasm), she had pale gold hair that sometimes looked green and decided she must

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have been a changeling left behind by pranking fairies who took a human baby away with them. She was our first mutant muse. Those same locals she hid from in the woods decided she slept in a coffin and was really a vampire, flying with wings made from old umbrellas and the lost kites of little local boys. Her father wrote a famous history of the two-pronged fork, but made a point of asking Sargent the painter to emphasize Edith's crooked nose when he painted her, but Sargent straightened it instead and omitted her pet peacock, thus giving her the confidence later on, when pushed to go to local balls with her hair all frizzed and hauled down along and over her nose, to spurn the white tulle dress chosen by her mother and buy herself one of long black velvet. She was six feet tall. If you looked like a greyhound, she said, why try to look like a Pekingese?

At her most crocodilous, as she called it, she said of one poetaster critic that he examined the nature of groundsel and the sex-life of the winkle and told someone else that she had just been defending him: "They said you weren't fit to live with pigs, but I said you were." Her histrionic acuity rarely faltered, perhaps because she warmed her head with a turban. Virginia Woolf said she looked like an ivory elephant. She herself, after meeting Marilyn Monroe and Zsa-Zsa Gabor and the international stud Porfirio Rubirosa, said she felt she had been made for physical love, but wept at never having known it. Her first love was an unresponsive Guards officer, her last the homosexual painter Pavel Tchelitchew; but her truest lover was the photographer Cecil Beaton, who made her lovely, finding her complexion fresh as that of a convolvulus, her eyebrows like tapering mouse-tails, the noble forehead like tissue-paper, her wrists like delicate stems, and her visage entire flooded with the mad moon-struck ethereality of a ghost.

VIRGINIA WOOLF BY THE RIVER OUSE

I am going to flush myself away, an Ophelia of the middle class. Suttee voce. Odd how the mind never deserts you, even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at the very last, when it is the thing that has condemned itself to go.

No more picnics, no more sun-mulled shrimp or heavy sherry trifle. No more peeking into the windows of London, when the saffron lamplight beckons and we stand on tiptoe, ogling the linoleum and the big pot rabbits full of fairground feathers. They eat with their sleeves rolled up, their elbows in the fingerbowls. They pick their noses while buttering their bread. They masticate from side to side, sliding the wodge of food across.

Well, here lies one whose books were writ in water. How may a flow appraise a flow? I would have been better off at the bottom of the Arno or shipwrecked with Shelley off Spezia. The mind is a surf, ladies. All else is a railway compartment full of Arnold Bennett. That is what has done me down, done me in: too many Brussels sprouts, too few visionary flight lieutenants.

I wanted a wedding cake made of snow, ice cream made from yaks' milk and pink. I wanted the bright beautiful refulgent day, not the sullen undertow that told me only: You are a woman and you will have to die. I do not thus like the initiative twisted from my hand. I go down the field with today's *Times* in my hand, to do something rich and strange to myself, and back I come, burbling for tea and scones, a yak, a crested warbler, a Beethoven with breasts, a Debussy with a womb, a Rodin with his period thick and musky on him, a Wagner in full flying menopause.

SOPHIE SCHOLL, 22 FEBRUARY 1943

One last cigarette, my Lord, as if tobacco were *your* sacrament, and they will manacle my hands behind me and lead me up a few stairs to the big locked door with the bulbous brass handle. As if I were being taken to the headmaster for a dressing-down. For chatter, or cheating in the Latin test. It will not be long now. All I hear is a rattle of keys. The tall narrow door opens inward, pulled, and two men with faces imper-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sonal as raffia tug me toward them as if they have been waiting for me all their lives. Seven seconds is all it takes from the door's opening to the end. Now, lifted aloft, I fly like Saint Joseph, a thought-out sentence per second. Two. I am laid face down on the rack. Three. A small bridge of wood comes down over my neck. Four. What have I done? Five. I insulted the Führer. Six. Who was *he*? Seven. I have been misinformed. Eight. I feel quite well, waiting. Nine. It will be more than twelve. Ten. I saw the hose, the lidded basket. Eleven. I have been misinformed. Twelve. Thank God it never happened. I am aboard the train from Ülm, a daisy in my hair and carrying a wicker basket that holds a spice cake and one bottle of Mosel wine. I draw the blackout curtains and see a jar of marmalade, two hundred and fifty grams of butter, some strudel. I am still in my student skirt and blouse.

HERMANN GOERING, NUREMBERG, 1946

Fat men are the wisest dreamers. I always ate up sleep, on my back or side virtually weightless, and here in a cell on the lip of oblivion I still munch the same creamy finitudes, doting on sleep's huge maternal billow, lurching downward only to heave myself back among the living for a final hug. That wind chime from on high is the tinkle of a hundred medals airing. Inert I lie, half-swooning, lifting an eyelash, or rather the baby muscle that guides it, but the exertion kills me.

So, this is the final sleep. I have often wondered at the rough handling meted out by executioners and their ilk to the corpses they have only just made, crudely slinging the sack of potatoes onto the wheelbarrow, shoving the floppy leg into the waiting truck and slamming it home behind the door. They do not even hose you down. Before the deed they affect a coarse civility of nods, head-lifts, tight lips, while the drums roll, the trap creaks, the dynamo whines. Then they belabor you about like a sewer made of cloth.

Well, you deathsheads, this is Hermann having his last little schlaf at his own bidding. Fat men make the best nodders-off. I will not wait for Keitel and the rest. To Keitel I said: "Never

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

confess. Be a man. Shout an oath when they spring the trap. Curse them for scuttling the *Graf Spee.* Damn that little spirochete, Goebbels. Yell to hell with that *amateur* fat man, Churchill."

This is the sternest hemlock of them all, but it makes me purr just to think of the burly master sergeant from Utah coming to take me to the rope, and looking forward to his eggs and ham afterward, or whatever these bogeymen eat, and finding the big paunch has slipped ahead of them like a new-calved island, pink with poison, or a freshly barbered hog. Oh that I could have been wearing antlers at this moment, just for show.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV IN CAYUGA HEIGHTS

A day of purest Arizona, this: dry, calm, and blue, tempting me to stroll abroad in the Arts quad of our famous university, where an open-necked shirt is formal enough if sheathed in a tweed jacket. When I first came here, I bought my clothing at the military surplus stores and have never felt closer to people than then. It was here I used to skulk behind the trees, then pounce upon passing (or failing) students to ask them if they knew what kind of tree it was. They never knew. I had almost no friends, American men having no gift for friendship (Swiss cuckoos are more cordial). Yet I was not looking for friendship today, or the names of trees, or even the dilatory afterbirth of the *Zeitgeist*, hovering like stratocirrus above Goldwin Smith; I was hunting no butterfly either, but the pensive silence for which universities are known. Amid which tenured geniuses think. All I could hear, however, was a barrage of uncoordinated drums and, raised in agony garbed as song, the unsorted voices of those who clearly cannot read. I was lone witness to the latest variant of Hottentot, who needs to bounce and twitch, deafened and barbarically exhorted, not to re-read *Madame Bovary* or the fiction of the neglected Hellens, but to Swing Out, Sister, or something such, doubtless from a branch of some tree the simians cannot name. I had always wondered at the pigskin cult, but now I see the link

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to drums. The young come here to shove and shout. Or, rather, to watch others shove and shout. Is it for lack of a civil war that American universities are so physical? Their syllabi swell with boys' books, Hemingway and Conrad, for instance, and the subdominant hemispheres of almost all brains obey the nonstop music. I am glad that the bruited move to rename The Corners Community Shopping Center *Le Petit Coin Nabokov* failed because of the suddenly revealed erotic connotation involved. "Why," said one tweeded worthy, not having made love to a Lolita—*Loh-lee-ta*—"it would be the same as saying Cooch Corner. Imagine a bus stop called that." Had I been there I would have directed his etymological lobes to the derivation of Grove Street, in the Oxford of England and not that of the Mississippi windbag, couching the earlier word (if I may) in the headline phrase: Carnal Ukase, No Thoroughfare. Sea. Yew. En. Tee. (As Quilty might say.) 'Twas there, in the old days, Community Corners et cetera, I bought my liquors, when I could afford. What a dismal privilege this Outre Tombe revenance has become. As if I am having my career all over again, I yearn for another, warmer lake, God (or royalties) permitting. I miss only the little ironing boards that swivel down. I miss the mucilage, the correction fluids, the misspelling of *pyjamas*, and the now-lost euphemism: comfort station. I even miss the petty Antarctica of the stomach as icecubes go sledding endlessly through. I miss all the No-Tell Motels. The view from up here is ridiculous: one sees only the tops of closed books, gilt or tinted, mottled or plain. All Open Sesames have closed.

HENRY M. NEELY

In the sky, apple-pie, at least in Henry M. Neely's *Primer for Star-Gazers*. When he looks at Cygnus, he sees a baseball game: *The batter has hit a fly to center. Albireo is running to get it and second-baseman Phi is also out after it. Shortstop Eta has run over to cover for Phi and left-fielder Vega is running in to back-up third in case of trouble.* He not only wants you to get it, he wants you to say it right too: Eta, he says, is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ate-a, Phi is *fie* (rhymes with *pie* and *rye*), Vega is *veega*, and, oh yes, Albireo is *al-beer-ee-oh* (accent on *beer*). Not only that: in some of his constellation maps, a neat amputated hand appears with an inch of cuff on show, the forefinger drooped to indicate where, say, Orion is. For other textbooks you have to be as grown-up as possible. You never get baseball and you may flounder for years when you wonder how to say Dschubba (*jub-a*, he says, rhyming it with *tub* and *rub*), though he adds that classicists disapprove of the name and that the government list of navigational stars ignores the classicists. The universe, when you look up at it, and so cramp the basilar arteries in the back of your neck, is so infantilizing anyway that Henry M. Neely seems to be doing it right, treating us in its presence as the children we in fact are. Gone back into his beloved universe since 1963, is he getting close to one of those hands? Will he one day soon show up in one of the diagrams, complete with head and trunk and legs, re-attached to his hand at last?

NIXON IN CHINA

Here in the library, one can tinkle the ivories ad lib, cracking a smile at the chinks in between. It is good to get away from them. In their old, naïve way they are too sly for the likes of me. The two of them love to hear a foxtrot, and when she breaks into a dance, does the actual step, he restrains himself but looks quite horny. They belong in an opium parlor, both of them. But they have that oily skin and you always know they are doing their damndest to screw you out of something. Thank the Lord for a wily old negotiator like me, heart of Irish oak, most of all when they get this tong-war look and you get dizzy looking into their hardly open eyes, as if you were falling backward off the Great Wall into the eye of the tiger. Dizzy, sweaty, that's how I get when they start to stare me down, and, wouldn't you believe it, I start to fumble and look sideways as if I am not who I am, plenipotentiary of decency. Of the power that came my way, let it never be said I wasted it, but without getting too formal, too much of a man in the golden

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chair, too unhusbandly, unfathering. This is a real country, even if you have to say it behind your hand, whereas ours, well ours is a bit of an easy mark especially for young crazies. I like to think a country keeps its rear-end tight, all apucker, like this China. Does them good to see a turned-up nose like mine, but they don't go running all over the place to change the Chinese nose. No sir, you could bomb pretty well any species of slants into submission, but you could never bomb them into changing their noses, their eyes, their ways with children's feet. A virtuous man needs something to fight against. That's why there is evil. Always another war to win out here.

That is why we have dragons.

That is why their women, from Madame Mao on down, have these twat-like slits in their dresses, to make you half-believe that what should be between their gams has slid around their thighs and is ready there for servicing, like a wound from that ritual of the thousand cuts. I have not studied Chinery for nothing.

Never mind how closemouthed they are, there is always a way in, past the silks and the red-faced lions, past the gingerbreadmen soldiers and the plump sentries with their fur hats and their dreadfully kept nails. How come the country that gave us gunpowder and spaghetti needs a few thousand manicurists?

I am summoned. Mister President has been away far too long just to have washed his hands. Back I go to the foul and febrile element I work in: the vice of others, their vile buyability. As Pat says, the men in suits have no suits. Here is a yellow peril that needs a good tailor too. See the supple bend of my threads as I move. Watch this old fox trot, watch me make these madams drool.

ROY HARRIS

Yup: Grandpaw drove the pony express, he and Paw went off to Oklahoma, built them a cabin there with just an ax. We had a phonograph, a Edison, with those sigh-lindrical records, yknow. I read and read, Shakespeare and Greek philosophy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I ran my farm real good. I do most things well. Then I trucked butter and eggs to places off the beaten track. In California, that was. I went to Rochester and stayed five years, bust my spine, wrote a string quartet, stayed true to Bach. By 1935 a national poll had placed me first among American composers and an international one put me just behind César Franck. It had begun all right. During the blitz on London they chose a hundred works to be saved, and my *Third* was the only one by an American.

Well, iffen I was a cornball, I got to Cornell anyway, as Composer-in-Residence, just about self-taught by them sighlindrical records. I just wrote all the time, I was on earth to do it, and I raced a fast car whenever I could. Open-air music, mine, of the prairies. Bury me there or in the streets of Laredo. I excel at the Passacaglia. Contrary to Virgil Thomson, I was never awarded by God or the US of A a monopolistic privilege of expressing our nation's deepest ideals and highest aspirations. I came right on the heels of César Franck, breathing down his neck. My pieces do not always begin alike. Boy, you sure lose buddies fast in this game. Old Virgil, he wrote right under my photo: "Roy Harris, in youth squarely a charmer, in middle age a businessman, later prone to anger," but he did add "at all ages clearly a star," so it's okay, Virge, I ain't agoing to slug you from up here. Just you keep away from my beans and flapjacks, let me hear the clank and jingle of the old corral, the clap-clap sound of steaming hoss-flop, the pounded triangle that says Come And Get It. Should I have smoked a foot-long pipe like Ruggles or worn a dicky-bow like you and Aaron, with one of them boiled shirts?

Just you give me the strong silent sun and keep your Pulitzers to yourselves.

WILLIAM EMPSON

"Slops," this poet and critic answered when asked what food he preferred, and he cooled his soup by squirting it back into his plate as if trying to cool his whistle. In the dead of winter he walked through slush and snow in ordinary shoes, from his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apartment to his office, about a mile, so I found and, at the kneel, fitted to him a pair of rubber overshoes, which he never afterwards seemed to remove. Before succumbing to his daily monsoon of cognac, he spoke in lively fashion of Newton, China, and Yorkshire, usually in that order, and then students used to creep up on him and gently spin him around in his office chair as if he were an astronaut being tested for vertigo. He never woke up during these rotations. He went back at night to a place full of rotting oranges, used tissues, and odd socks. *Don't you know who he is?* his South African wife kept saying. She was the eighth type of ambiguity. Off he set, to visit Wallace Stevens, who had died twenty years earlier, and back he came, saying with his best military-colonel-cum-Tory look, "We are none of us getting younger." If he made the journey, who knows what he found at the other end. A palm, perhaps. He wrote the best poem in the world about a woman slipping off her nylons. He once, for some minutes, watched my neighbor's door lamp through my telescope, thinking it Mars.

GEORGE GERSHWIN

I gotta get it, I'm gonna get it, I got it. Read it in the newspaper that Mister Paul, Mister Whiteman, Mister Paul Whiteman and I, I, I, I, we gonna do a piece together, a piece so different it will make the world stop and spin the other way, east-west. Well, Mister Whiteman and I, I, I, I, know nothing about this newsy little news item. We have no plans, though we do seem to have talked man to man some time or other. So I gotta take the train, see, I hear the rhythm of the rails — the word said *riddem* — and it is all there anyway, that long dizzy ascent on the clarinet included. All I gotta do is write it down, syncop-syncop-ated. Cat-screech among the honored brownstones. An epileptic's gentleness with the balls of his feet. Three weeks only in the work, and it is a riot. Thank God for newspapers that have the brains to tell us what to do, to do, when we can't think of it. When in doubt as to where to go, even if destined to die young, go decide on a train, a train,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the train will tell you. And when you read in the newspaper that you died young, died young, you don't have to believe it, like that nice Mister O'Hara said. If you gotta, you gonna. If you gonna, then, then, you don't always gotta. Get it?

A BORGESIAN BEAST

Imaginary being, he called me, that silvery, dapper Argentine whose favorite word was *dim*. As if I were some volume in the infinite, darkling library of his mind. Why did he never call me what I truly am? I was never a white panther with black rosettes, the beast too blurred to be seen, too shy to look blind men in the eye. According to him, I looked down, too fierce to be seen at all. Only when I did would other beasts approach, and when they did (said my Argentine) I fell upon them and devoured them. Never. No, dearest folk, I could have been a rainshower chasing a white sheet, a burst of shellfire pitting a snowy plain. But I was not. I was never cinders in milk. I was a Dalmatian, named for islands, and only a legally blind man could have seen my apparition in such black-and-white opposites: I was the beast made by the figure his shadows cut into his glare, I was the ghost his penumbra pocked with craters, I was the black night of the soul mended with balled-up white hankies. I was all imagery. I was a deposed chicken inspector dreaming of a panther who imagined a leopard in the act of devising a dog.

FRITZ ZWICKY, ASTRONOMER

Over the years I guess I wore those bastards down. I called them spherical bastards because they were bastards whichever way you looked at them, the diners at the smarty-pants Atheneum Caltech dining club. Down on the floor I'd land, challenging them all to one-arm pushups, and I never had a single taker. I got away with it, in a profession in which as always the plums go to the sleek, because I and I alone discovered supernovas. I also found the missing mass that holds the universe together. Among the great zooming minds, I am not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

such a little shit myself, even if, in the final years, they did shove me off down to the basement where the graduate students make love to their constipation. "Who the hell are you?" I'd yell at any of them. "I am Zwicky, the explosive, flat-faced, pale-eyed Bulgarian raised among the cuckoo clocks and the slotted cheeses. Tell them you have seen the great Zwicky at his most Bulgarian. I am the klutz who got it right." I never told them, though, my head was full of stars exploding long before I knew they could. With the gentle, timid, utterly neurotic cripple, Baade, I invented the word for them. Baade was a cretin, but others invented that word for him: not I. Baade used to go around asking, "What if Zwicky goes mad? He's going to murder me." Baade and I sat at opposite ends of the dining table, but I never attacked. One evening I said, to them all, "We should launch a rocket to the moon to recover rocks for study." But all they said was "Aww, Fritz, leave the goddamn moon to the lovers." No vision, those fuckers. It was I who first thought of mixing explosive chemicals with the emulsions used in photography. Point the scope and the film would fry. You'd hear it. It was I who stuck a charge on the nose of an Aerobee rocket and fired a bit of metal off into deep space when the rocket reached its apogee. It was I who had a night assistant fire a rifle bullet straight past the Hale telescope and out the dome to knock a hole through the air to make the seeing better.

Those bastards in their smoking jackets, worrying about which fork to use. I am still at the little Schmidt in the cluster of carrasco oaks, and the universe I am still such a boor in is wilder than they think. And more boorish. I myself contain the missing mass. I am an asteroid named Zwicky. So is Baade. In the Main Belt. Will we never collide? Will we never arm-wrestle? I wait for all those bastards down there to come up here to be asteroids. Good evening, gentlemen. Now you are through, say hello to your favorite bull seal.

DUKE ELLINGTON

Aiming not to be too smooth, too downtown chic, when the wet-eyed band began to play, I made up music for a shaggy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

world full of mules and homeless dogs, dirty plates and air-shaft shut-ins. Our moles had hairs growing out of them. We played the grapefruit rinds, the empty cans, the ghettos of ebony. Something cumbersome and roughcut was vital: tans, grunts, hiccups, washboards, and muted shrugs came with the indigo, the velvet. Our music lurched from rubato to showdown. We were cats yowling at the moon, not so slick or sharp as lumped together under shagbark. We growled our prayers into metal cones, making backstreet nocturnes that said nothing was flawless, not even the booksmart harmony of the old-time Greeks.

And yet, for all the hotsteps, and beats syncopated until there was nothing left but in-between, I was always yearning for that grander something: the symphony, the suite, making me, even if only for one evening, the lynx of *Nachtmusik*, his forte something contrapuntal to the point of mayhem, his weakness the old habit of, when the band cranked up, heading for the low-down tune, when all the time there were battlements and esplanades, boulevards and plazas. I took the A-train once too often. In my wide pliable mouth there lurked a nightjar's blistered tongue.

COUNT BASIE

Unstrung by noise amid which hid a chime, a ring that sang, I saved one finger for the note that sealed a chorus. Black *embonpoint* hunched over a fairy's wink, I must have seemed dumber than ebony. *He plays so few notes*, they said, unable to spot a picky high-wire artist when one came along. Pink, link. Pinkety-plink.

I was Bill, I was William, I the Count who eased his way in on there as of then, oh yair, somebody between lyric simpleton and chromatic oaf. I did not so much tickle ivories as caress them half to death, cunning linguist of the grand. The yachtsman's cap gave me tons of extra class.

Watch that ruby on his little finger, they said when I laid the keyboard open just a crack after all the rest had done and the melody was dying in the air in front of us, its energy newgone. And then I did my Countly thing: never stretching a riff

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

too far. I had a small and brassy band, a touch of cornball if you like, but with often enough the milky intimation of a world more delicate than the universe itself. Gossamer tux, bone-marrow wand. Fat man in a loose white suit embroidering his glee with big flourish of the pudgy wrist. Oh yair. The Count of Fin- esse. Pli- able. Dain- ty. What you always wanted but were too crude to say.

SIGMUND FREUD AT 66

When you want a wrong opinion, find a quack. When you cannot stand to know the truth, go to some gross inferior. This is called denial. Then let him carve away at your jaw and palate as if he were making a sandwich in some Viennese delicatessen.

There I was, bleeding to death on a soiled cot in a tiny room, while, stuck in the trench the quack had left in my mouth, a vague retarded dwarf fidgeted and whined. The grotesque bulb of his head wobbled about. And he shouted for a nurse because he was drowning in a tide of my freshly minted blood. Puss in Boots I called him.

After the nurse bustled me out of there, I had to think again, obliged to want an opinion that was right. Rhinologist Number Two said, "*Ach*, Herr Doktor Freud, one dies just as finally from unknown, or unadmitted, truths as from their opposite. Not to wish to die is merely to misinterpret a dream. The death wish is nothing but a state of mind. As for the cigar that graced your mouth, might it not have been safer in your other end, where, although the gasses are flammable, the wind flows outward only?" When I need another opinion, I will ask for it with that very same below-stairs mouth. I will ask the dwarf.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kenneth Koch

A Time Zone

On y loue des chambres en latin Cubicula locanda.
Je m'en souviens j'y ai passé trois jours et autant à Gouda
Apollinaire, "Zone"

A light from the ceiling is swinging outside on Forty-second
Street traffic is zinging
Collaborating on The Construction of Boston is interesting
To construct the city of Boston Tingueley is putting up a big
wall
Of gray sandstone bricks he is dressed in a French ball
Gown he puts the wall up during the performance
His costume is due to art and not to mental disturbance
Now the wall ten feet high is starting to tremble
People seated in the first rows run back for shelter
However the bricks stand firm Niki de St. Phalle dressed as
Napoleon
Shoots at a Venus full of paint with a miniature (but real)
cannon
Rauschenberg's rain machine's stuck it gives too much
moisture
People look very happy to have gotten out of the theatre
People ask that it be put on again but it can't be done
Tingueley with his hand bleeding says Boston can be
constructed only once
And that is the end of that
Next day the Maidman Theatre stage is flat
I like the random absurdity of this performance
Done only once with nineteen-sixty-two-and-art romance
I meet Niki four years earlier in France in the spring
Five years before that I am with Janice and Katherine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In Greece two thousand years ago everything came crashing
We stand and try to imagine it from what is still standing
Years before this in Paris it's the boulevard Montparnasse
Larry Rivers is here he is living with a family that includes a dwarf
We are talking I have a "Fulbright" with us is Nell Blaine
I am pulled in one direction by Sweden in another one by Spain
The idea of staying in Europe jolts me gives a convincing jerk
It's New York though where most of my friends are and the "new work"
Today with Frank O'Hara a lunch connection
The Museum of Modern Art is showing its Arp collection
Frank comes out of the the doorway in his necktie and his coat
It is a day on which it would be good to vote
Autumn a crisp Republicanism is in the air tie and coat
Soon to be trounced by the Democrats personified as a slung-over-the-shoulder coat
Fascism in the form of a bank
Gives way to a shining restaurant that opens its doors with a clank
However before being taken into this odoriferous coffer
A little hard-as-a-hat poem to the day we offer
"Sky/woof woof!/harp"
This is repeated ten times
Each word is one line so the whole poem is thirty lines
It's a poem composed in a moment
On the sidewalk about fifteen blocks from the Alice in Wonderland Monument
Sky woof woof! harp is published in Semicolon
Later than this in this John Myers publication
O'Hara meanwhile is bending above his shirt
His mind being and putting mine on being on International Alert
There's no self-praise in his gossip

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Which in fact isn't gossip but like an artistic air-trip
To all the greatest monuments of America and Europe
Relayed in a mild excited wide open-eyed smiling
conversational style
Larry he says and Larry again after a while
He is crazy about Larry these two have a relationship
That is breaking the world's record for loquaciousness
I first meet Larry on Third Avenue
The El goes past and it throws into my apartment rust dust
soot and what-have-you
Larry has a way of putting himself all out in front of himself
And stumbling through it and looking good while seemingly
making fun of himself
This is my friend Larry Rivers says Jane Freilicher
She lives upstairs Larry is a sometime visitor
He is dedicated at this moment entirely to drawing
Abstract split-splot and flops and spots he finds a blur and
boring
Give me a glass of pencil that hath been
Steeped a long time in Delacroix and Ingres nor does he
neglect Rubens
He is drawing up a storm in his studio working hard
A little bit earlier he and Jane and others are bouleverseś by
Bonnard
Bonnard show at the Modern Museum
I meet these people too late to go and see them
I am of New York not a native
I'm from Cincinnati which is to this place's nominative like a
remote dative
In 1948 from college I come here and finally settle
The city is hot and bright and noisy like a giant boiling kettle
My first connection to it aside from touristy is sexual
A girl met here or there at first nothing serious or contextual
That is earlier now I'm here to live on street subway and bus
I find people exciting unrecognizable and of unknown-to-me
social class

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Finally they start to come into focus
For a while it's like being at a play I may have the wrong tickets
On West Tenth Street now I am firmly settled in New York
I am a poet je suis pòete but I'm not doing very much work
I'm in love with a beautiful girl named Robin
Her father has a hand-weaving factory he gives me a job winding bobbins
It is a one-floor loft in the garment district on Thirty-first Street
Pat Hoey visits someone next door on snow-white feet
Pat and I like to go to the ballet at the City Center
I get "Balanchined" as in a wine-press all Jacques d'Amboise has to do is enter
My poetry is somewhat stuck
It's taking me a little while to be able to write in New York
My painter friends help and what I am reading in the library
It is not the contemporary antics this happens later of John Ashbery
This shy and skinny poet comes down to visit me from "school"
When he and Jane Freilicher meet it's as if they'd both been thrown into a swimming pool
Afloat with ironies jokes sensitivities perceptions and sweet swift sophistications
Like the orchids of Xochimilco a tourist attraction for the nations
Jane is filled with excitement and one hundred per cent ironic
This conversation is joy is speed is infinite gin and tonic
It is modernism in the lyrical laconic
Our relationship's platonic
With what intelligence linked to what beauty linked to what grassy gusty lurch across the canvas
Jane and her paintings I realize once again happiness
Huh? is possibly going to be available after long absence
Here today in a gray raincoat she appears
The style is laughter the subject may be a cause for tears
Larry has some of the qualities of a stand-up comic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He says of John Myers John Myers he always calls him that
John Myers never John John Myers says he isn't fat
Well he doesn't have a fat EAR but look at his stomach
And oft at a party back his head he throws
And plays the piano singing a song he made up "My Nose"
His nose bothers and is thus conquered by Larry Rivers
He's doing a Bonnardesque painting it's so good it gives me "recognition" shivers
It's a room filled with women with somewhat beautiful fishlike graces
Mostly orangey-yellow they have sexy and sleepy looks on their faces the thick
Oil paint makes it look as if you'd stick
To it if you got next to it it also looks very spacious
Now Larry is sitting and smiling he is copying an Ingres
His hand is shaky his lines are as straight as coat hangers
Why don't you I say rather dumbly put something witty in your work
No Kenneth I can't he says prancing around like a funny Turk
Charcoal in one hand and making a little gesture with the other
One Sunday I go with him to the Bronx to visit his sister and his mother
Here I am with Larry's sister and his mother
Sitting in the kitchen above us is a motto
Joannie is blonde her brunette friend is warm and flushed as a risotto
I rather fancy her and Larry's mother fancies it stupid
To have invited this girl at the same time as me so interrupting the arrow of Cupid
Posing for Rivers his mother-in-law Berdie before a screen
Posing for her son-in-law this woman full and generous as the double issue of a magazine
The French *Vogue* for example or the *Ladies Home Journal*
Frank thinks her marvelous he finds the sublime in her diurnal
Larry is making a leafy tree out of metal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Here is his Jewish version of Courbet's painting of a funeral
Jane loves Matisse and is a fan of Baudelaire
In these paintings she is working on a secret of yellow blue and pink air
She and Larry make a big painting together
Larry with an unmeditated slash Jane with the perpetuity of a feather
That in a breeze is trying to pull itself together
I'm looking at the finished product it's rather de Kooningesque
Being de-Kooning-like some way is practically of being a New York painter the test
Here today though is not a de Kooning but one of Jane's it's luscious big and feminine
I am inspired by these painters
They make me want to paint myself on an amateur basis
Without losing my poetic status
Jane is demonstrating to me the pleasures of using charcoal
I am copying a Delacroix of a black woman called I think The Slave Girl
Erasing makes a lovely mess
It looks like depth and looks like distance
Ink at the opposite end of materials is deliberate and daring
No chance to erase it and oil pastels like wildflowers in a clearing
My Aesthetic I only paint for a few years is rather elementary
Get something that looks good looks real looks surprising looks from this century
I am sitting at a little table downstairs in the Third Avenue apartment
I like buying slabs of masonite and all kinds of equipment
At the Metropolitan on a big wall is a great big Rubens
Of a king and some nobles on horses bigger than cabins
I am walking through the European Collection
With Larry and Jane they're giving it a professional inspection
On drawing paper I'm doing some Seurat-like dotting
I like this even love it but I know it's going to come to nothing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is invigorating to stand in this studio
John Ashbery comes to visit he is listening to Bob and Ray on our radio
It is a small old-fashioned console attacked by salt water
John finds them wheezingly amusing all over the house sounds his raucous laughter
He and I "go back" to Harvard College
Now he is sitting at his typewriter in Greenwich Village
He's just finished a poem and he's happy as after a good repast
He is certain this feeling won't last
John is predictably and pleasantly gloom-filled
I've just driven to New York from some place north of Bloomfield
I'm an hour and a half late
This enables John to finish his poem as I with mixed feelings find out
"The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers"
He made good use of this couple of wasted hours
Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch in the pajamas
It's a vault over W. C. Williams and a bypass of Dylan Thomas
He is still sitting at his little portable
Being because of my poem-causing lateness exceptionally cordial
We are both fans of the old Mystery Plays
We also find each other mysterious in certain ways
This mystery becomes greater as more time passes
Then finally the mystery itself passes
We're at Harvard together
We walk along talking about poetry in the autumn weather
He is not writing much this year but he likes to collaborate
So do I we do a set of sestinas at a speedy rate
Six sestinas each about an animal with one concluding one called The Bestiary
There is also a three-page poem in which all lines rhyme with the title The Cassowary
Next we do a poetic compendium called The New York Times
September Eighth Nineteen Fifty-One both with and without rhymes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Our poems are like tracks setting out
We have little idea where we're going or what it's about
I enjoy these compositional duets
Accompanied by drinking coffee and joking on Charles and Perry Streets
We tell each other names of writers in great secret
Secret but absolutely no one else cares so why keep it
We're writing a deliberately bad work called the Reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg
In a feeble attempt to win a contest the style is the Kenyon-Review absurd
Larry and Jane propose to me renting a house in Easthampton
We go sizzling out of the city with the rapidity of a flu symptom
No this is actually a year later my memory missed it
I now go to California to be a "teaching assistant"
This year goes by I meet the girl who is later my wife Janice
I love to kiss her and to talk to her very often it's talking about my friends
I also talk a lot about "Europe" and France
She's a little deflating and tells me that to be a great poet
I have to do something she tells me but I forget exactly what
I think have for all my poems some sort of system
I am shaken but still feel secure in my avant-garde wisdom
East Hampton glaringest of Hamptons Hampton of sea shine of de Kooning and of leaves
Frank's visiting we're composing a poem he tugs at his sleeves
It is a Nina we are composing it is a Nina Sestina
For Nina Castelli's birthday her adorable sixteenth one
This year this month this week in fact Frank writes "Hatred"
A stunning tour-de-poem on an unending roll of paper
It makes going on forever seem attractive
Writing in the manner of O'Hara means being extremely active
Twenty people are over then thirty now about forty
Zip Frank sits down in the midst and types out a poem it doesn't even seem arty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I try it out with little success
It's one of those things the originator can do best
"Hatred" is full of a thundering array of vocables
From it straight through to the Odes Frank's talent is implacable
Now here he is holding out to me a package
Of Picayunes he taps one on his kneebone-covering khakis
Finally we have a poem for Castelli's daughter
Moonlight dissolve next day we're visiting Anne and Fairfield Porter
Fairfield is in his studio a mighty man
Posing like fluttering then settling sea birds around him Jerry Katie Elizabeth and Anne
He has opinions that do not waver
On his canvases he creates a bright and wholesome fever
Flowers like little pockets of yellow and pink pigment
Are aspiring up to a tree or a wall or a house like a sunlight shipment
At a John Cage concert there is hardly a sound
It's the paradise of music lost and music found
I find it pure and great as if a great big flash of light were going off underground
Satie and Webern are hitting me in the head and so finally with The Cantos is Ezra Pound
Frank and I are writing very long poems
Long is really the operative word for these poems
His is called Second Avenue mine When the Sun Tries to Go On
I don't know where I got the title
I'm working on it every afternoon the words seem to me arriving like stampeding cattle
It's not at all clear but for the first time in my life the words seem completely accurate
If I write for three hours I allow myself a cigarette
I'm smoking it's a little too much I'm not sure I can get through it alone
Frank and I read each other segments of these long works daily on the phone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Janice finds it funny now that I've dropped this bunch of pages
That I can't get them back in the right order well I do but it's by stages
It is April I have a job at the Hunter College Library
I come down to the Cedar on a bus hoping to see O'Hara and Ashbery
Astonishingly on the bus I don't know why it's the only occasion
I write a poem Where Am I Kenneth? It's on some torn-out notebook pages
The Cedar and the Five Spot each is a usable place
A celebrated comment Interviewer What do you think of space? De Kooning Fuck space!
In any case Frank is there he says he likes Where Am I Kenneth?
I carry this news home pleasantly and the poem it mentions her to Janice
John's poem Europe is full of avant-garde ardor
I am thinking it's making an order out of a great disorder
I wonder at what stage in life does this get harder
The Cedar Bar one hardly thinks of it is what may be called a scene
However one closed to the public since no one goes there to be seen
It is a meeting place for the briefest romances
And here is Norman Bluhm at the bar saying Who cares about those nances?
And here he is shoving and here is de Kooning and there is a beer
Being flung at someone Arnold Weinstein or me through the smoke-talky atmosphere
Of this corner booth
Voici Guston and Mitchell and Smith and here on top of everything is Ruth
Kligman being bedazzling without stop
She writes a poem with the line At the bar you've got to be on top

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Meanwhile tonight Boris Pasternak
Is awarded the Nobel Prize and is forced to give it back
Frank O'Hara is angry there seems both a flash and a blur in his eyes
Kenneth we've got to do something about Pasternak and the Nobel Prize
What? well we ought to let him know
That we support him Off flies a cable into the perpetual snow
Dear Boris Pasternak We completely support you and we also love your early work
Signed puzzlingly for him in the morning's glare if he ever receives it Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch
Staging George Washington Crossing the Delaware
Alex Katz comes up looking like a pear
He has some white plywood boards with him he says where
Shall I put this stuff and a big bare
Wall is the side of their emplacement No chair
For Alex painting and cutting And now they're there
The seven soldiers one cherry tree one Delaware crossing boat
Hey hey Ken cries Alex I've done it
I've made you a set for George Washington Crossing the Delaware
The British and American armies face each other on wooden feet
I write this play in our apartment on Commerce Street
I am working in the early afternoon and stay up late
Dawn is peeling oranges on top of the skyscrapers
On the stage a wall goes up and then it's taken down
And under the Mirabeau Bridge flows the Seine
Today Larry and Frank are putting together "Stones"
It's a series of lithographs
Larry puts down blotches violently they look like the grapes of wrath
Frank is smoking and looking his best ideas come in transit
He stares gathers his brows puffs looks up he has it
I walk the nine blocks to the studio he says Come in
New York today is white dirty and loud like a snow-clogged engine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Huge men in undershirts scream at each other in trucks near
Second Avenue and Tenth Street
De Kooning's landscapy woman is full of double-exposure
perfections
Bob Goodnough is making some small flat red corrections
Jane is concentrating she's frowning she has a look of happy
distress
She's painting her own portrait in a long-sleeved dark pink
dress
I'm excited I'm writing at my typewriter it doesn't make too
much sense

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Susan Wheeler

Lasting Influence

This is the repugnant part, where now
you covet the loss which a moment before
brought you the severed torso in the dream.
Since your friends are feasting, you must act quickly.
The child's carriage careens on the stair.

Dancing a rondo on the lacustrine tile,
you look up suddenly to a bevelled undoing.
This is no respite or reward.

For so many years you have cast out, learning to
search (you think of roses), and now it is clear
that the driveway which borders this undulant lawn
is the twilight escape route of robbers. In another life,
they catch the children at the critical moment
and bundle the bodies from the cold.

The imagined wit, you think, is never worth the bargaining.

Then the plane takes off, and the woman with the poodle
snuffs your cigar and takes a brick from her purse
and lifts a train of somnolence from the seat.
You are drifting; she has bent your ear, singing;
you are under the wing of an implacable monster.
Grace is elephantine, it does not mean reward.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So you undid something unexpected, and in your delight
you forgot to inquire whether it was something reasoned
or only a precarious dish on a shelf. Possession become
indistinguishable, fireflies raffling on a screen,
a route of departures crossed like wires through which,
during hideous nights, voices make divisions of lives.
Each day you have locked a door and turned out a lamp
that brought only the sorriest comfort while lit.
Now the whole rift derives clearly.

She calls to say, she is ready to depart, is there anything
you need? Then it is you recognize the precipice
for what it is, then you see that out there, on the
dawning bridge of a fallacious jump, a cowboy is
coming after you, calmly askew, promising breath.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Robert Saxton

Stoning Byron's Ghost

Avenging ivy padding up the wall of the Abbey's west wing
Could only be part of a masterplan to rescue posterity
From a curling, yellowing, nonetheless dangerous manuscript
Locked in the tower. Otherwise, while the estate was emptying
Of tenants (sick to death of living on the master's charity),
Falling into disrepair, filling with weeds and being stripped

Of all its remnants of prestige, year by year this book might gather
Strength, occasioning at first postscripts in letters, or conversations
Amid rumours of cigar smoke after dinner, then with ease finding
Subscribers, whose sons and grandsons might see the thing spread farther
Than could have been imagined, in multiplying editions and translations
And ratified by every kind of leather, cloth and paper binding.

But more likely these are just my uncle's ramblings, tall tales
For which, struggling with speech, he couldn't find listeners any more,
Legends of childhood, a handful of vivid lifelines, like the time
He was replacing slates on the east wing roof after a night of gales
And the zealous gardener tidied away the ladder lest it be an eyesore
To the master's lunch guests assembled in the morning room—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Discussing, perhaps, the hair's-breadth survival of the orangery
When their talk was stopped by a clearing of the chimney's throat,
A tumble of bricks and a shower of soot pronouncing a gruff "ahem."
Before you could say "knife," laughter was rippling through the company
Circled round the boy on the hearthrug in his ragged, blackened coat,
Shyly gulping wine (his first and only) from a glass with an air-twist stem.
And wasn't it the same year, another night of blustering March
Winds, though less tumultuous, that five or six villagers walking home
Around midnight through the tunnel of trees down the woodside lane
Past the chapel vowed they'd seen, framed by the side-porch's Gothic arch,
A ghost in frenzy—brilliant sobering white in the moonlight's monochrome.
Breathlessly, in the parlour, they told their tale. It was a thing profane,

Surely it was Byron's ghost agonized by a fit of longing or remorse,
The cruel, demonic man. Had it not been for his gammy leg, you'd have sworn
They'd not have got away with Christian souls still roosting in their bones.
Next morning the sexton found, trapped between the vestry's double doors,
Hanging limp like a shot-filled seagull, a surplice, dirty and torn;
And at its foot (or so my uncle claims) blood on the scattered stones.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Blind Love

Dark gathers
In this wood
Without weather

Hours before the sun
Slips into its
Blindside run.

Blackbirds drink
The light in secret.
Dippers risk their blink

Beside the stream,
Bibs darkening
Until their gleam

Fades from sight
To memory softly
Printed by the light

That lingers yet
Behind the eyes; which
In a while I shut,

And when I look again:
No change, or hope
Of change.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Black static
Floods the eyes
With panic;

As when we drift awake
At first light,
And some opaque

Form, a pillow
Or a lover, blocks
The window

We expect to find,
And makes us think
We're blind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes from the Wilder Shores

An Interview with Lesley Blanch

Lesley Blanch was already a distinguished traveler and journalist when her first book The Wilder Shores of Love *was published in 1954. It was immediately acclaimed as a classic, and became a worldwide best-seller. It told of four nineteenth-century women of contrasting backgrounds and temperaments who sought in the East the adventures and emotions which were rapidly disappearing from the industrialized West.*

Her following book, The Sabres of Paradise, *which took six years to complete, with research in Russia and Turkey, was the biography of the Imam Shamyl, the religious leader of the Caucasian tribes who fought the invading Russian armies*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from 1834 to 1859. It combines biography and history with beautiful descriptions of the Caucasus and the campaigns in which both the young Tolstoy and Lermontov participated. Four years later she published Under a Lilac Bleeding Star, *a selection of her travel pieces, in which she discussed some of her predecessors, compulsive romantic travelers whose ground she too had sometimes covered.* Pavilions of the Heart, *"a light book," is about the houses and rooms where great loves have been lived: George Sand and Chopin at Nohant, Liszt at Woronince, et cetera.* Round the World in 80 Dishes, *a cookbook containing some of the dishes she savored on her travels, preceded* Journey Into the Mind's Eye: Fragments of an Autobiography *published in 1968. The autobiography tells how she was visited in her nursery by a mysterious Russian whom she simply calls "The Traveller," a friend of her family who periodically appeared laden with gifts—Fabergé eggs, icons, et cetera. Later he became her lover. One day he vanished, never to return. The Traveller is the origin of Lesley Blanch's passionate and life-long involvement with Russia and Russian literature.*

In 1983 her biography of Pierre Loti revived an interest in the "unjustly neglected" French writer and launched a number of reprintings of his books in France. Her most recent book which was published last year is From Wilder Shores: Tables of My Travels, *in which she describes her experiences of food through a life of travel, whether with bedouins in the desert or with the President of the United States at the White House.*

Lesley Blanch was born in London in 1907, the only child of upper middle-class parents, and was educated at St. Paul's School, "but above all at home." She studied art at The Slade before becoming a journalist and later the Features Editor of Vogue, *"something generally dubbed chi-chi, something you never live down!" An early marriage was short-lived and soon forgotten; then in 1946 she married French diplomat and Goncourt Prize-winning author Romain Gary, a naturalized Russian, with whom she traveled in various parts of the world where they were* en poste. *The marriage was dissolved in 1962.*

At eighty-three Lesley Blanch is still extremely attractive

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and vivacious. Though she describes her home as "a peasant dwelling set in a bamboo grove," it is in fact a beautiful, small house on the hills beside the Italian border in Southern France. The tiny station of Garavan, nearby, built by Queen Victoria, is the last stop before Italy, and sometimes from her garden you can see frontier patrols along the rock heights that separate the two countries. A keen gardener, she has created a very personal enclosed garden, with fig and citrus trees, jacarandas and mimosas, as well as lesser shrubs and bushes. It is a green bower screened by tall cypresses and bamboos: "annihilating all that's made to a green thought in a green shade," she quotes Andrew Marvell.

Inside, the house is filled with mementos of her travels and adventures: Russian icons, samovars, Qajar paintings, and rugs from Persia and Turkey, exotica from India. Divans and the scent of incense and jasmine further enhance the exotic and relaxing atmosphere. During the day Ms. Blanch dresses in shirt and trousers, but in the evening she changes into long kaftans and robes, brought back from her travels. She works at a desk strewn with books, papers and household bills in the living room. All other rooms, including her own bathroom, are lined with bookshelves. When at home Ms. Blanch is visited by a stream of friends and admirers, but her much-loved companions are her two cats, Smiley ("because he smiles all the time") and Kucuk (Turkish for "little"). This interview took place in September of 1988 at Lesley Blanch's home in Garavan, before and after a delicious lunch that she had cooked and which we consumed in the shade of a fig tree in her garden.

INTERVIEWER

You were born into an upper middle-class family. Were your parents wealthy?

LESLEY BLANCH

No. They were always broke. My father was a very clever and cultivated man, but he didn't *do* anything. He spent his time in museums and galleries, discussing things like Chinese por-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

celain and early oak furniture, about which he knew a great deal. They had been quite well-off, especially my mother, but the money trickled away gradually. My mother was not strictly beautiful, but seemed so. She was extremely elegant and artistic, and extremely frustrated too. Having married she had decided to become a devoted wife, and everything she touched she made lovely—houses, plants, food; she had magical hands.

INTERVIEWER

As an only child you must have been much cherished.

BLANCH

I suppose I was, but I was also smacked every day as a matter of course: "Has she had her smacking today? No? There!" Whack! I was frightfully naughty and a great tease. I did everything to annoy people, and I still do!

INTERVIEWER

You went to St. Paul's Girls' School, which is considered the best in England, but in your autobiography you say that you were educated by reading and listening to your "elders and betters." Who were they? Who instilled the love of literature in you?

BLANCH

My parents, The Traveller, and anyone who came into the house. My parents didn't suffer fools gladly, so our visitors were interesting, and I always was surrounded with books and pictures. I fell in love with Russia through The Traveller, and learned a bit of Russian. I don't know it well, but I'm not lost when I go to Russia. I used to go to London University when it was at Somerset House and listen to Prince Mirsky's lectures on Russian literature.

INTERVIEWER

Presumably you were not expected to work, so how did you start? Did you know you wanted to write?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

I was certainly given the idea that I had to earn my living double quick! I went to The Slade and studied painting. Among my contemporaries were Oliver Messel, Rex Whistler and others who became famous later. I picked up a living doing book jackets and private commissions before I started journalism. For example I knew something of Pushkin's life and times, so I would write an article on that, a subject not generally known. My father fell ill and there was no money left, so I worked very hard. All the Fabergés The Traveller had given me were sold. Eventually I became Features' Editor of British *Vogue* and had to write about everything *except* fashion—books, people, plays, travel. That was in the thirties. During the war, I wrote propaganda stuff for the Women's Services.

INTERVIEWER

You met Romain Gary during the war. Where?

BLANCH

In London. He had joined de Gaulle and become an airman, a navigator with the Lorraine Squadron. He had no money and no home, but I had a charming old house in Chelsea and some beautiful things in it. It was all new to him and he was amused by it on leave. He used to lie in bed—a Louis XVI piece saved from the bombing of an earlier house—and say: "You mean that Staffordshire rabbit was in your nursery when you were six? *Quelle continuité*!" He was Russian by birth and I fell in love with him partly because I found again The Traveller in him. I would recite old rhymes in Russian, or give him cucumber pickle and endless glasses of tea, and he felt at home, somehow he found his Slav roots again.

INTERVIEWER

You are very much in the tradition of the romantic English woman traveler who falls in love with the East and goes off enduring all sorts of hardships. It started with Lady Hester Stanhope, didn't it?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

No. She was not a really romantic figure, any more than Isabella Bird Bishop, the travel writer. Perhaps Hester Stanhope had a romantic *life*, but she was not really a romantic *herself*. England has always had a tradition of such involvements with the Middle East and the Arab/Islamic world. It was a superb setting for heroic and romantic living. Unfortunately it has been marred now by the Arab-Israeli conflict. I am probably one of the last of a breed who knew something of those lands as they once were.

INTERVIEWER

What made you choose those particular four women in *The Wilder Shores of Love*?

BLANCH

They were essentially romantic and adventurous creatures who fled the early nineteenth-century menace of machinery and industry, and I felt at one with them. Jane Digby—Lady Ellenborough—was wildly romantic, had endless love affairs, and ended by marrying a sheikh and living beside him in the desert. Isabel Burton married Richard Burton, the great Arabist who translated the Arabian Nights. *He* was her Oriental landscape. These women sensed the whirring wheels of industrialization approaching, and escaped to find fulfillment, as *women*, in the East.

INTERVIEWER

Isabel Burton is chiefly famous for her final act of burning her husband's writings on Eastern eroticism, for which she will be blamed by posterity.

BLANCH

It is silly to blame her. She burned a bit of what the West sees as pornography, but what does it matter? There is no shortage of western pornography available today, and as she thought she was saving his soul, being an ardent Roman Catholic, rather than a prude, why blame her?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Isabelle Eberhardt was a curious case: highly promiscuous, dressing as a man and dying of her excesses—physical and perhaps spiritual. In the book you say that like her you could "live and die in the Sahara." For most people the Sahara is just an infinite expanse of hot sand, rather monotonous and dangerous.

BLANCH

If they say that, it means they have not understood! I can't explain the attraction of the desert except to say that it is wild and mysterious and magical as my garden here is on rather greener terms. I don't like a tame countryside. In England only Cornwall and Scotland have a few wild places left, which I love. You can keep Surrey and the good-style Cotswolds! But then I don't belong in England—it is rather restful. I don't belong anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

After *The Wilder Shores of Love* you wrote a long preface to Harriette Wilson's memoirs, *The Game of Hearts*. She was a famous courtesan—the great Duke of Wellington was one of her clients. She tried to blackmail him, which elicited the famous reply: "Publish and be damned!" What interested you in her?

BLANCH

Her delightful immorality. For the first edition I wrote a long preface of some fifty pages in which I spoke about prostitutes and their place in society, which I think very necessary. It was stupid to close down the brothels, because prostitution goes on but now it can't be controlled, whereas if brothels were permitted and properly supervised from the point of view of health and hygiene, they would be agreeable places, free of blackmail and scandal. Homosexuality has now become perfectly acceptable—about time, too—though I think that demanding women, particularly in the United States, have made

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it so impossible for men that they have had to turn to each other.

INTERVIEWER

It took some six years to write your next book which you told me you consider your best: *The Sabres of Paradise*, the story of the Imam Shamyl. Your husband Romain Gary admired it greatly, and called it a masterpiece, didn't he?

BLANCH

Yes. Praise from him was praise indeed!

INTERVIEWER

It has a very rich texture and is beautifully written, and it was a great success everywhere—France, Germany, Russia . . . .

BLANCH

And I have just heard that a Daghestani man, an officer in the Soviet Army, has translated it into the Daghestani language, which is interesting. Well, there had been nothing else on this splendid subject, except in Russia. I wrote it in Los Angeles in the late fifties. My husband was then the French *Consul Général* there. I used to get up at three or four in the morning and write, and my research often took me away, sometimes to Turkey and the Caucasus. But when I finished it, there seemed to be something missing, a gap, and I decided I must go back to Istanbul, where Shamyl had lived briefly in exile after his defeat. My husband thought I was mad, and discouraged me. We always had to give a huge party on July fourteenth for the French citizens of Los Angeles—there were about eleven thousand of them there. Hundreds used to come to this annual affair. It kept me busy twenty-four hours, but I left the next day. I had a feeling that I *had* to go and find Shamyl's family. I arrived in Paris and went straight to the Turkish Embassy, but they could tell me nothing. I came down to our house in the Midi, but there was no boat leaving, and the Orient Express was not running and the planes were all full. Eventually a seat was found for me on a plane leaving

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from Rome the next day. I stood up all night in a crowded train laden with suitcases, cardboard boxes, nuns and sailors, in suffocating heat. From Rome, where I only just caught the plane, I reached Istanbul. I went to the old Park Hotel: "Oh Madame Gary, why didn't you let us know you were coming? We have no room!" But they knew me well, and turned someone out to give me a bed. I threw myself down, exhausted, but could not rest. I *had* to go to Besiktas, along the Bosporus (where Shamyl had once lived). The area was different then—old dilapidated houses and beggars, a most desolate place. Today it has been tidied up and rebuilt. I asked the beggars, Shamyl? Shamyl Imam? One of them finally pointed to a dead-end alley. I went down it and found a broken-down door and pushed it open. A woman looking very Caucasian with slanted eyes and dark hair came out, tight-lipped. She spoke French and I asked her if it was possible that Shamyl had ever lived there? She gave me a look like a steel dagger and said: "Why do you want to know?" I said I was writing a book about him. She looked me up and down and said: "He died in Mecca." "I know," I said. Then she said something which I contradicted, and she responded by saying: "I see you know your subject—you can come in."

She was Shamyl's great-granddaughter, and she was leaving that very night for Jakarta where her husband was the Egyptian Ambassador. She had only come over for her sister's burial. So you see, another couple of hours and I would have missed her! Hence my premonition that I *had* to leave immediately after that exhausting party in Los Angeles. She said: "I'll stay," and did. We became great friends. She gave me all sorts of papers and letters and unknown material. I became a friend of the whole family. My husband had been so discouraging about ever finding any more material that I couldn't resist sending a telegram: "Floating on the Bosporus with Shamyl's great-great-grandson." Apparently he showed it to his secretary: "Ma femme! Quel numéro, ma femme!"

INTERVIEWER

When you left England in 1946 after your marriage, you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were *en poste* in Bulgaria for two years, I think. And later you wrote *Under a Lilac Bleeding Star*, which is a Bulgarian saying, isn't it?

BLANCH

Yes. There they say that a compulsive traveler is "born under a lilac bleeding star." I have traveled all my life, so it fits. Of course that meant leaving my husband often—you might say far too often. He had other women of course, all men do. They are so proud of their . . . aptitudes!

INTERVIEWER

What about you? As a very attractive, and they say, sexy woman, you must have had lots of offers on your travels?

BLANCH

Naturally. And I liked having adventures in far away, wild countries. Everywhere I traveled I collected lots of friends, and yes, I did have lovers too.

INTERVIEWER

You went to Bulgaria after the war, when the country was in turmoil. Were you happy there?

BLANCH

Yes, very, although there were problems: practically no food and many dramas. There were three armies of occupation—American, British and Russian. I learned to speak Bulgarian of a kind, pretty quickly. We made many friends. Best of all I got to know the gypsies. We had no money and I had no chic clothes, but I remember I had some scarlet damask curtains which I had brought from England to brighten a leased apartment; so I took them down, and the gypsies came and made me some *chalvaris* (wide Turkish trousers) which I still have, and still wear at home. They would crouch on the floor and sew. They would not take any money: "Oh no, not from you! You are one of us!" they would say. "Will you come to my daughter's birthday feast, christening? Will you dance at my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

son's wedding?" Of course I would, and did. I remember they were always sitting on the ground in their *mahallahs* or camps, picking nits from their heads and putting them in a saucer! But the sun shone, then, and I adored their seducing music.

INTERVIEWER

When you went back to Paris from Bulgaria, your husband worked at the Foreign Office, *Le Quai d'Orsay*. Did you get to know the intellectuals? It was the heyday of the Existentialists—Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus. . . .

BLANCH

Romain knew them all. I knew Camus, but not very well. I spoke French rather badly. I am not an intellectual in their way. I *loved* Malraux—he was a really romantic figure. Nancy Mitford was a great friend, just settling there, and becoming a part of the Paris scene. Both Romain and I revered de Gaulle, though I never met him. He wrote me a lovely letter about *The Sabres of Paradise*, and I have heard he said that it was remarkable that a woman should be able to understand the battles so well and describe them so vividly. True, I used to have my bed covered with maps, working out the campaigns.

INTERVIEWER

It is sometimes difficult for two writers to live together. Apart from practicalities, there is the question of professional jealousy and competitiveness. Was Romain Gary jealous of the success of your first book?

BLANCH

He didn't like it at all. His friends couldn't believe it because they thought him such a great man, but he was jealous all the same.

INTERVIEWER

What about you? Were you jealous when he won the Goncourt for *The Roots of Heaven*?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

Oh no! I wanted him to be successful and fulfilled. It never entered my head, never! Sometimes I got fed up with his implacable selfishness, but we had a lot of laughs together, and I took on all the chores while he, convinced of his genius, devoted himself to his writing.

INTERVIEWER

Considering the *modus vivendi* you had achieved with Romain Gary, were you surprised when he wanted to divorce you and marry Jean Seberg?

BLANCH

Yes. And I said I would not give him a divorce for a year, to see how it went. But finally they married, and had a son, whom I sometimes see. He is a very handsome boy.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel bitter about the split?

BLANCH

Only in the sense that we had become very great friends and had worked out a way of living together in which I took on all the chores and complications and mechanics of life. We understood each other perfectly about work and had the same sense of humor, and we both *loved* animals. He used to say, "Lesley doesn't mind my infidelities, she is very eighteenth-century!" And then we had just begun to have some money, which we never had before.

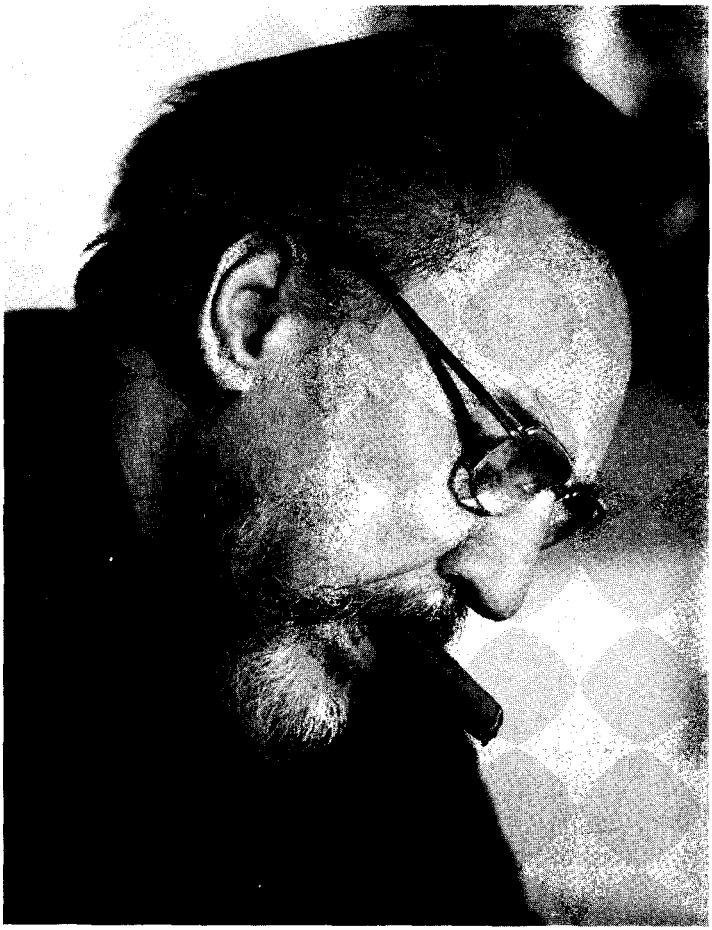
INTERVIEWER

What did you do after your divorce?

BLANCH

We both continued to live in Paris and our lives did not overlap. But fifteen years later I came down here and bought this place and made this garden. At the end of his life Romain wanted to buy a house in this area. He always loved the Midi.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



© Jacques Robert

Romain Gary.

He said to a friend: "I played my cards wrong, I should have stayed with Lesley—she let me do what I liked."

INTERVIEWER

Were you surprised when he committed suicide?

BLANCH

No, I wasn't surprised. We both believed in euthanasia and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the right to choose one's death in dignity. He didn't want to grow old. "Oh you are so young and enthusiastic! You don't mind anybody knowing you are sixty!" he would shout down the dinner table, advertising the fact! He spoke English perfectly, with only the faintest Russian accent. But knowing how the English-speaking people find a French accent irresistible—rather like darling Charles Boyer's—he would turn on a strong French accent for any attractive woman next to him at a dinner table. It made me laugh, and he would catch my eye and laugh too.

INTERVIEWER

Journey Into the Mind's Eye, which you subtitled *Fragments of an Autobiography*, and which includes an account of your travels in Russia, notably your trip to Siberia on the trans-Siberian train, was written partly in memory of The Traveller. When did you first go to Russia?

BLANCH

In the early thirties. I went to Moscow and Leningrad because of my interest in Pushkin. By the way, I have just heard from a friend that there is now a metro station near where he fought his fatal duel, and it is faced entirely with *black* marble. Isn't that wonderful? When I first went there Stalin was starting his purges. There were few tourists, and as I spoke a little Russian the authorities didn't bother with me much. I wasn't aware of the persecutions, but one saw it was a grim and harsh life all around. There were still children hunting in packs, the *Bezprezoni*, looking for food. There were still some *droshkies*, and I would take one and go to museums or the *traktirs*—cafés. On a later visit I saw Shostakhovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at the Bolshoi—or was it the Marinsky?—and met the composer on the stairs. I recognized him from his photos and introduced myself. He invited me to a party in the Green Room after the performance. There was a samovar and cakes, and several of the performers and people I didn't know, but they were all very welcoming.

In the fifties, after Stalin's death, I went back and traveled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the Caucasus. Things were easier there, and under Khrushchev too, just as now everything is changing with Gorbachev. I think he is wonderful! The capitalist world is stupid not to hold out a hand to him—to give him a chance.

INTERVIEWER

Was your husband ever with you on those journeys?

BLANCH

No. He didn't feel the same interest in Russia as I did, although he was Russian, Russian-Jewish, but I thought of him as just Russian, and that is what he liked in me: making a Russian home for us, with cabbage soup and samovar and *piroshkis*. Later he passionately wanted to be French, because he was grateful to France and de Gaulle was his hero. But you can never *become* French, can you? I can't, anyway.

INTERVIEWER

People like you who are passionate about Russia and Russian literature are usually disappointed in the Soviet Union. But in your book you seem to approve of it. In the passage relating to your trip to Siberia you write most poignantly and vividly about the plight of the convicts in the nineteenth century with their chains and fetters dragging through the frozen steppes, yet hardly mention the millions and millions who perished in Stalin's concentration camps in worse conditions. How come?

BLANCH

I think the Russian Revolution was an inevitable move in the context of the twentieth century, just as Khomeini's Islamic revivalism is today. It is something, a phase, to be gone through. I don't think it will kill Persia, and it hasn't killed Russia. You might remember what the Tzarina Alexandra said: "Russia can only be ruled by the *knout*"—the whip. Yes, that very English, rather silly stubborn lady who was killed in Ekaterinburg in 1918, said that. I don't know what conclusions to draw from that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

You had traveled in Persia in the past and in 1974 went back to write the biography of Queen Farah. Did you get the impression that a revolution was inevitable?

BLANCH

Yes. That book was a commission—the only one of my books I have written on that basis; otherwise I have always chosen what I wanted to write. But I loved the Shahbanou. She was a most charming woman, and she did an enormous amount for Persian culture and the arts, such as the Museum of Carpet, which she created, and the Museum of Qajar Paintings. She used to buy old houses to save them from demolition—because of course they were all being pulled down to be replaced by hideous modern buildings. She once said to me: "Look at this photograph of the Gates of Qazvin—I was only a few years too late to save them!" I got to know her rather well, and we often talked very freely, but then she would be called away to some duty, and my time was up. She was—and is—a remarkable human being.

The destruction that followed the fall of the monarchy was in a sense inevitable. However, the world's treatment of the Shah is one of the most ignoble episodes of modern history. The craven attitude of the French, the Americans, and the British. . . . Only Sadat was loyal. When you think that some African leaders, who are reported to have cut up children and made chops and steaks out of them, still live in great comfort in Europe, one realizes how political maneuvers stink.

INTERVIEWER

You told me that you alternate long, serious books with short, light ones. After *The Wilder Shores of Love* you wrote the Harriette Wilson introduction and a cookbook, *Round the World in 80 Dishes*. I know what an accomplished cook you are, having sampled your cuisine, but what made you write a book about it?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

I wrote it for a child in America. He was the son of the friends with whom I was staying in Long Island, and one evening he disappeared for a while and came back with a very good omelette he had made. So I wrote a little book for him, and did the illustrations myself. I enlarged it for England, where people still lived on rations and couldn't travel to taste exotic cooking. Nowadays cookery books are serious business, but I can't be serious about it. Sometimes when I'm writing I start cooking to relax, but usually I forget about it until the smell of burning tells me it is ruined. There goes another saucepan and my dinner, I say.

INTERVIEWER

The "light" book that came after *The Sabres of Paradise* was *Pavilions of the Heart*. What gave you the idea?

BLANCH

I thought that houses in which people have lived and loved were interesting. I put in certain things people already knew about, for example Liszt's life in Woronince, a château in Poland, and lesser known ones, such as the Portuguese nuns. The book ran into trouble: the editor, Tony Goodwin, who was a wonderful man left the firm for the States, then the art editor got pregnant and left; the girl who replaced her had never heard of Delacroix, and one illustration was printed upside down! It was a mess. I tore into the editorial director who, being a gentleman, had to stand and take it, while I being no lady just let fly! I insisted on a brief Errata, saying that a proper one would be as long as a lavatory roll. But the writing is nice, so I'm not ashamed of it.

INTERVIEWER

Your biography of Pierre Loti, published in 1983, has led to a revival of interest in him and his work. What made you choose him, since there are other biographies of him done by Frenchmen?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

Yes, but not good ones in English. He was an interesting character, and I shared his deep love of Turkey. He was not just a mawkish and sentimental writer as some think. Remember, people like Henry James and Marcel Proust admired him greatly. He wrote beautifully and had very sensuous rhythms. The French would say "Oh yes I read him at school, the book about his love affair with the Turkish woman, *Aziyadé*, and so on." But his travel books are marvelous; and the one he wrote on China, reporting on the Boxer Rebellion, is terrifying. It took me three years to write this biography. I always read all I can about my subject to get a balanced view before I begin, and I always try to find the families concerned. I had the luck to meet his daughter-in-law. She had lived beside Loti in the same house and didn't like him. In fact she skinned him alive for me! Anyway, the book was a great success in France, although at first the French were dubious about my enterprise, because they thought that an English woman, speaking French in a rather careless way as I do, writing about *their* author, couldn't possibly get it right. But *La Revue des Deux Mondes* gave it six pages; it won a prize and it set off a whole new interest in him. I get many fan letters: *Figaro* asked me to write about his mother, and *Match* wanted me to write about his house; *Figaro* invited me to a cruise they were having in Turkish waters to give a lecture on Loti, but I declined that. I like to travel alone.

INTERVIEWER

One of the things I enjoyed about *The Wilder Shores of Love* and *Loti* was their brevity. Today biographies are so very long and contain a great deal of unimportant information, don't you think?

BLANCH

Oh yes, typical American style! I hope I'm more succinct. Lately there have been endless full-length books about each of the four women of *The Wilder Shores*. I keep getting asked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to review them! The other day I was sent one about Isabelle Eberhardt. It is very worthy and well-researched, but rather pedestrian and redundant. But when you get a man like Paul Bowles, who has lived in North Africa and has lately translated some of Isabelle's short stories, and knows what he's talking about, then it is very interesting. He knows what the Sahara means, the magic of it, the feel of it, and what *she* felt.

INTERVIEWER

There was an error of attribution in *Loti* about a poem by Auden which you had said was by Eliot, and I remember how every reviewer picked it out—irresistibly!

BLANCH

Yes, it makes them feel superior. I suppose I forgot to check it at the last minute. Editors don't check things any more, and typesetters are worse. It also often happens when you are your own proofreader. You know your rhythm, you've been writing it for years, so you skip along and don't catch a fault. The proofreaders today are hardly any better than the typesetters, who don't care what they're printing. I remember a secretary I had once—I wrote a review of the ballet *Swan Lake* and she typed *Swan Cake*! I said, "But Miss Jones 'the elaborate convulsions of Swan Cake' doesn't make sense!" She was very pretty and pert, and said: "No, Mrs. Blanch, nothing you write makes any sense to me!" I cherished that.

INTERVIEWER

You have written only one novel, *The Nine Tiger Man*, which was very well received when it appeared. Your autobiography, *Journey into the Mind's Eye*, reads like a novel too, especially the story of The Traveller. Were you not tempted to write more fiction?

BLANCH

No, because I can't invent. For biography I have to remember, and then work round a character. In biography you don't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

invent anything, but you interpret. However, that doesn't mean that you don't use your imagination. That novel was a landscape—the landscape of Rajput India which I adored. I had pulled a ligament in my leg and had to stay on an island in Jaipur. The Indians were very kind; they used to heave me about in a boat and take me round the island. You could hear the leopards coughing at dusk in the far hills, and the parakeets flew round turning the sky green. The whole thing was extraordinary. One day I saw what I thought was a log, but it was a crocodile. I had heard the story of a group of English women being put on the island during the Mutiny and not daring to escape because of the crocodiles—just stuck there, with no news and fearing the worst. From that I imagined the whole novel. That story evolved, but no other ever has.

INTERVIEWER

It is interesting that your husband was the opposite: he only wrote fiction, and won the Goncourt twice, the second time under a pseudonym. What do you think of his work now?

BLANCH

I don't read novels. Few last. Romain was not a disciplined writer, but he had wonderful ideas, and sometimes wrote wonderful stories. The one about the strolling players, for example. I thought *The Roots of Heaven* was fine. It had a momentous theme, like his autobiography, *Promise at Dawn*, which he wrote in Hollywood and gave me to read in installments as he went along. Of course he invented a certain amount of that, but basically it was true.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of Hollywood, did you enjoy living there? Who were your friends? Did you mix with the film world?

BLANCH

Yes. We both loved it. And we knew everybody: Aldous and Maria Huxley, Stravinsky and his wife Vera, George Cukor,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who became a great friend, Gary Cooper, Charles Boyer—everyone. James Mason, Sofia Loren, David Selznick. . . . Later I worked for George Cukor at M.G.M., which was fascinating. I wrote *The Sabres of Paradise* while based in Hollywood. At that time Cecil Beaton was there too, for *My Fair Lady*. We used to escape up to the hills for a picnic sometimes: "Where are we all going to dinner tonight?" Cecil would ask wearily, and I would say to so-and-so's—usually some film star. "Oh Jesus! She'll be wearing a tiara!" he would say. In Hollywood you have to know the failures as well as the successful people. The failures were especially interesting; they knew all the seamy side of Hollywood. They lived downtown where nobody chic would dream of being seen. The snobbery was enormous there, but as I didn't mind being seen at the wrong address, I would drive down beyond Hollywood and Vine and find a sort of synthesis of the past. People sitting in their verandas, in rocking chairs: an old cowboy in boots would say: "Yes, Ma'am, I used to round up the cattle for so-and-so," naming a star like John Wayne or Hoot Gibson. I knew John Wayne, and liked him very much, despite his ghastly politics.

INTERVIEWER

What about failed women?

BLANCH

They wore baby dresses and heavy make-up, and looked like wrecks. They had been lovely and were often full of good stories. Few grew old well.

INTERVIEWER

It is amazing that living there and having an *entrée* into the film world you didn't have your books made into movies. They seem made for it, especially *The Wilder Shores of Love* and *The Sabres of Paradise*.

BLANCH

M.G.M. bought one story from *The Wilder Shores*, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nothing came of it. Cukor bought *The Nine Tiger Man*, and I believe Fox has it now. Periodically people buy options for radio, television, films, but they never come to fruition. It is one of those things.

INTERVIEWER

Your prose is very poetic and graceful. Did you read, or still read, a lot of poetry?

BLANCH

No. I'm not very keen on poetry. I had a grounding in English poetry because it was part of my home life, and I still read Byron, some Browning, and of course, Blake, and always Donne. I also like Stevie Smith. When I was very young I was plunged most unsuitably into the Restoration playwrights. I was introduced to Russian authors by The Traveller and read them a great deal, first of all Pushkin. I was also very fond of some of the minor Russians nobody else reads: Aksakov, Saltykov, Shchedrin, et cetera. . . . I was brought up on Herzen. I have two sets of his work: Constance Garnett's translation in small volumes, published in 1925, which I take with me everywhere. Now he has been discovered and is properly lauded by the Oxford intellectuals.

INTERVIEWER

Herzen was a liberal. Are you, politically speaking, a liberal?

BLANCH

Of course. I should say I'm rather pink. I know great wealth produced industry and patronage of the arts and all that, but that was a different world. Today when I see the prices of houses and clothes and food I wonder how the young are going to live, and in what surroundings. Greed is destroying the planet through exploitation of natural resources. Look what we are doing to the seas, the forests, the animals! Here in the summer people throw their dogs out on the roads and go off

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on a holiday. The late Duchess of Windsor knew that, and the cruelty of it, and she used to send people to collect them and give them shelter or find them homes. She is still a very much-maligned woman. I knew the Windsors in Paris and remember them with affection.

INTERVIEWER

What about French literature? Who do you read and like?

BLANCH

I read the classics. I love Gérard de Nerval, Merimée, Stendhal, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Gobineau's *Contes Asiatiques*, et cetera. In English I also read nineteenth-century writers, Kilvert's *Diary*, Queen Victoria's *Letters*, and such. I love *The Babur Nameh* [memoirs of the Emperor Babur]; Dean Stanley's book on the Eastern Church is superb. I particularly enjoy Lampedusa's writing—not only *The Leopard* but all his shorter pieces. These are some of my favorites.

INTERVIEWER

You also have read American writers, and were—still are—friends with some of them. I remember you telling me once about Carson McCullers, a favorite of mine. Can you tell me about her?

BLANCH

I knew her very well in New York. She liked my books and I had not read hers, but I caught up and read them then. She is marvelous about the Deep South, and gave me a taste for books of that region. So I read Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner. I enjoyed the society of Truman Capote as I loved his books. I remember a party given by Leo Lerman at his house in the east eighties, and I was sitting between Edith Sitwell and Marlene Dietrich, and Truman was lying across my lap with his head on one hand and his feet on the other! And I thought, if this is American literary life, I'm enjoying it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I also *love* American folk music—just as I love the folk or traditional music of the Middle East, Persia, Asia, and elsewhere. I *write* to music: It isolates me, but my tastes are catholic: Bach, Wagner, reggae or pop—if good.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever witness Carson McCuller's drinking bouts?

BLANCH

She was very fragile. I remember one day taking a friend from England to see Carson. She was living up the Hudson, and we arrived for lunch. She said: "I guess you're thirsty? Would y'all like something to drink?" She produced a large teapot and we thought it was rather odd to serve tea at that hour, but out of the teapot came neat gin, served in teacups *before lunch*! She was a very sick woman, and extremely neurotic too.

INTERVIEWER

What about older American authors—Henry James, Edith Wharton, et cetera?

BLANCH

I have read them, and admire them greatly. By the way, a contemporary American writer I think supremely good is Gore Vidal. For his irony, wit, style, and the way he tears through American institutions. I am by nature an iconoclast myself and enjoy his bombshells. He is an old friend I cherish particularly.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a routine for work? When do you work?

BLANCH

I used to write early in the morning—I was rather *matinale*. When I was writing *Sabres* in Hollywood and I was running a house and doing lots of entertaining, I used to write when I came back from a party, then have two or three hours sleep,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

get up at five and write till eight. Alternatively I would get up at three and work till seven, then get into the car and go up into the hills around Los Angeles to have breakfast in some cowboy café. But it was irregular work—Romain and the house came first.

INTERVIEWER

Now that you can write any time you wish, do you write more slowly?

BLANCH

Sometimes it rattles off quickly. But there are certain types of work over which I get *le trac* [stage fright]: journalism and reviewing books. I hate the time limit and the clock. It is no good just skimming a book; you are *reviewing*. I read it carefully and write about it with care, whether panning or praising.

INTERVIEWER

Do you like writing? I mean the actual process—you write so beautifully and it reads so well.

BLANCH

Oh no! It's hard! *Painful!* I sometimes write a page fifteen times. I use children's exercise books with lines. There are twenty lines on a page, and I can see that each page represents about 220 words, so I know how I'm going. I throw out the notebooks after the first draft is typed. The pleasure is when you feel you have done something good. I will "die with my eyes closed," as the old Oriental saying goes, for having written *The Sabres of Paradise*, because by so doing I've fulfilled a true desire.

INTERVIEWER

What about traveling? Did you like traveling rough or in comfort?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

I like impromptu traveling, roughing it one moment and going to dinner at an embassy the next. They usually know I'm there, and I take a stylish sort of dress with me and turn up looking terribly *mondaine*, having perhaps slept in the bus the night before. Then everybody asks one to endless lunches and dinners which if one accepted one would stop doing anything else. I have always particularly enjoyed going to the British Embassy in Turkey. It is such an historic place: it's where Lord Stratford de Redcliffe gave a ball after the Crimean War and the Sultan, to mark his gratitude, left his palace for the first time and watched the dancers with great interest. Traveling, I like not to know what's going to happen next; when you don't know when and where you are going to sleep or what or who you will encounter.

INTERVIEWER

I know that for the moment you don't undertake long, difficult journeys because of a broken knee, which luckily has healed almost completely. But where would you like to go next, if possible?

BLANCH

I love Afghanistan more than anywhere else, perhaps, but how to go back now? I long for the Middle East, too. Afghanistan is so unspoiled, so savage still, and the men are so handsome. You go over those appalling mountain passes and suddenly come across a little *Chai-Khaneh* [tea house], with a samovar, and a few grubby cushions, and you want to stay there forever. I never wanted to leave. I wanted to take a little house and live there, but they said I would never stand the winter; it gets to forty degrees below zero. I would have caught pneumonia and died uncomfortably.

INTERVIEWER

Who are your favorite travel writers, past and present?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLANCH

Lucie Duff-Gordon's *Letters from Egypt* is one of my *livres de chevet*. She lived and died there, and she adored the Egyptians. She became consumptive in 1850, and went to Luxor where later she died. But her understanding of the country and its people, and her descriptions of the camaraderie she shared with them are marvelous. I feel a special affinity with her—I too feel very close to Egypt.

Tolstoy's description of the Caucasus in *The Cossacks* is superb, as are Lermontov's, though he is more cynical. I love Robert Byron—another cynic. He sent everything up, but he is supremely good. Lord Curzon is marvelous on Persia and Central Asia. Of today's writers I think Peter Levi writes of his travels very well. He is a poet and an Oxford don. Some travel books are full of information, worthy, but I wish they combined it with fine writing, which is what you enjoy in Gérard de Nerval on Turkey, for example, or Flaubert on Egypt, or Loti everywhere. All these young travel writers nowadays give you masses of information, historical research and so on, but not much *style*. Dervla Murphy is so intrepid that one forgets she has first done her homework. Recently I read a curious book, Philip Glazebrook's *Journey to Kars*; it is like no other, and records the sort of haphazard traveling which I myself like to do.

INTERVIEWER

Life is so precarious today that even the young, like my children and their friends, frequently have intimations of mortality. Do you think of death? It seems an incongruous question, not to say crass, to ask one so youthful and lively. Do you believe in an after-life? Or indeed in God?

BLANCH

I don't know. God is within us, if He is anywhere. Something like conscience. Sometimes I feel that heaven would be where I could meet all my animals again. People might be too

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

complicated. For example, suppose a man has had two wives, one after another, and has loved them both deeply. Will he meet them *both* again? What would he do?

INTERVIEWER

En effet, the logistics of heaven don't bear thinking about!

BLANCH

I don't want to die as long as I am well in my body and my mind. There are too many things I like doing. Life is a present; one can't have enough of it, can one?

—**Shusha Guppy**

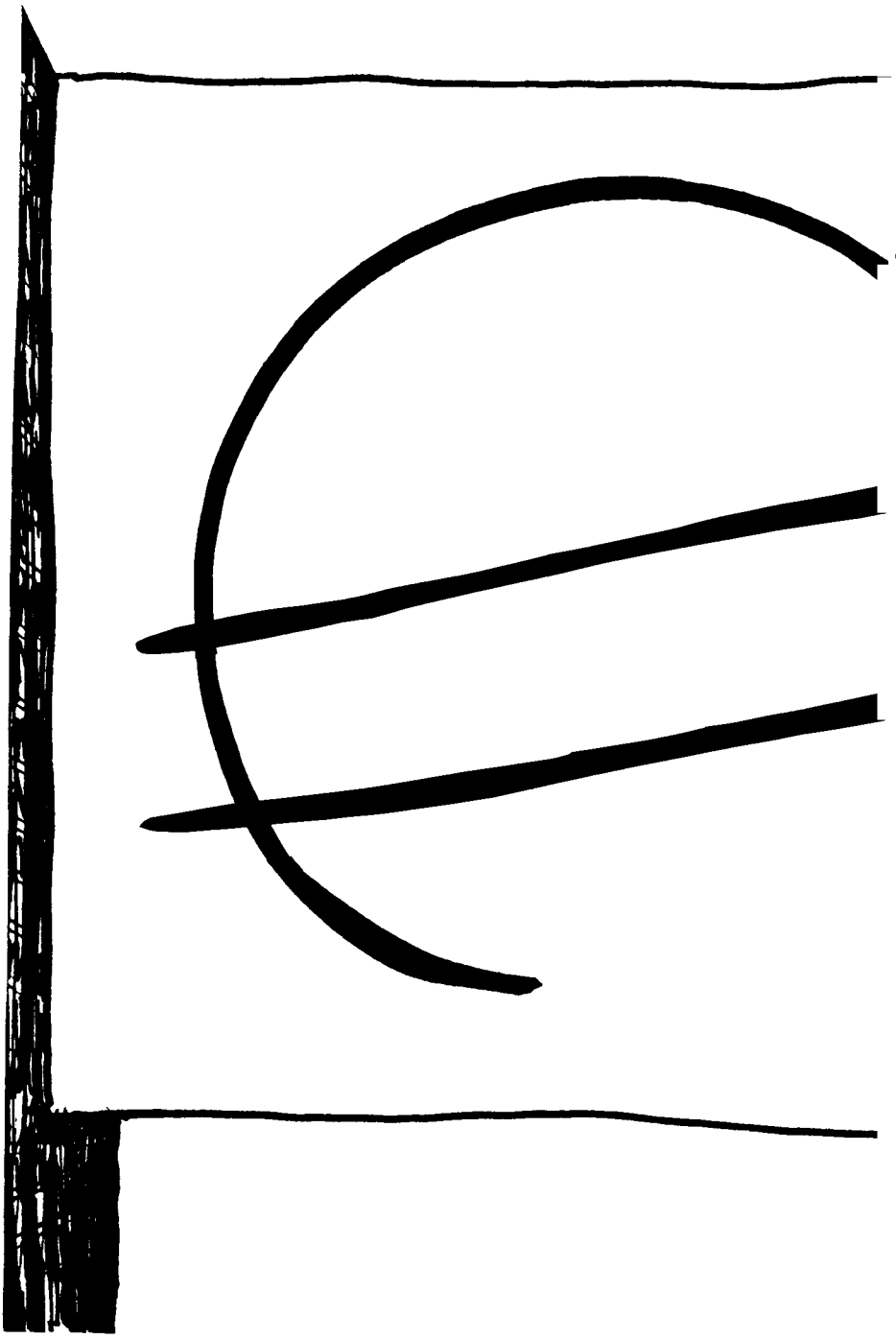
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Portfolio

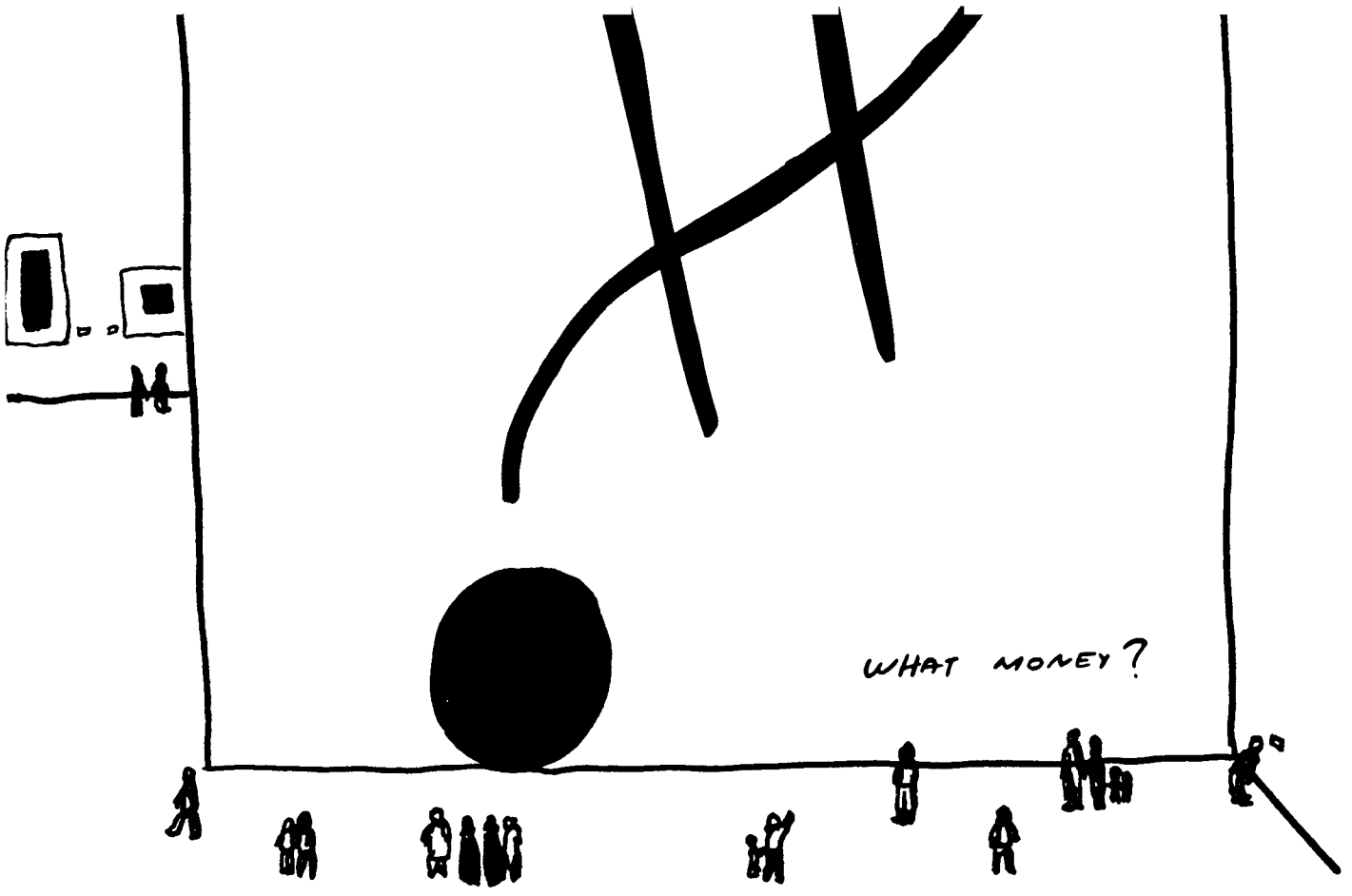
New Economic Shorthand: What Money? Totally Unequal No Money

Jessica Diamond

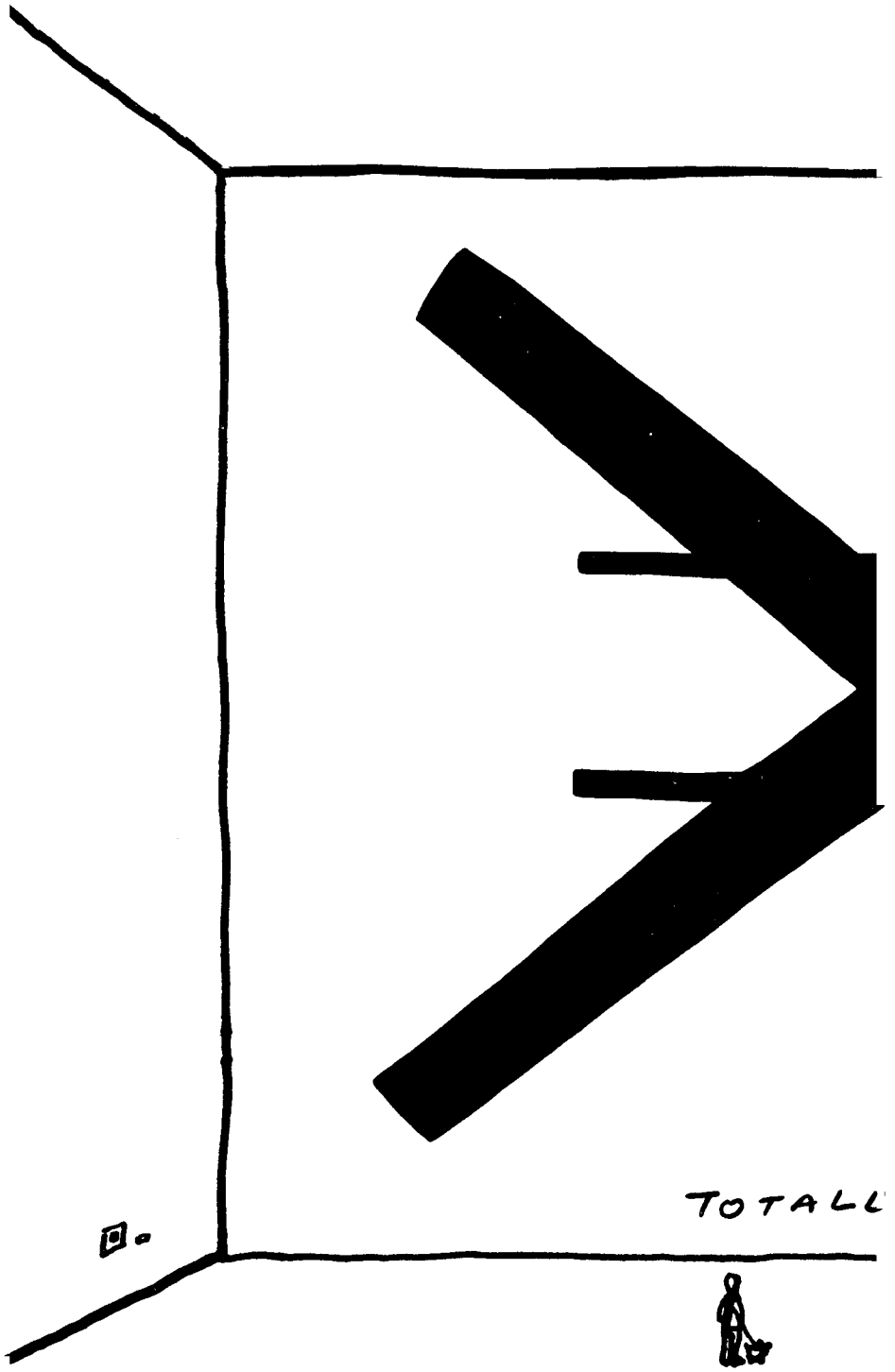
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



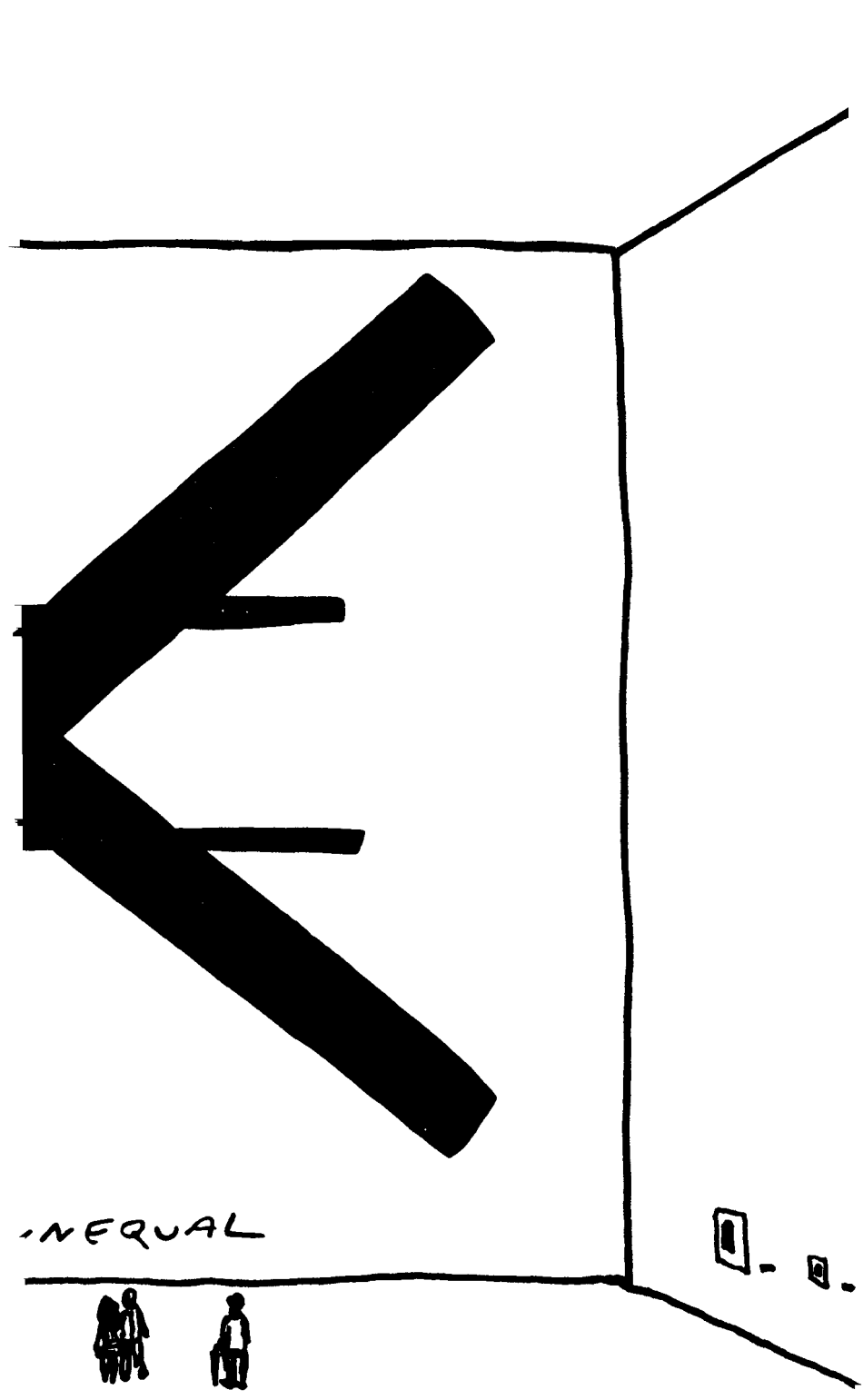
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



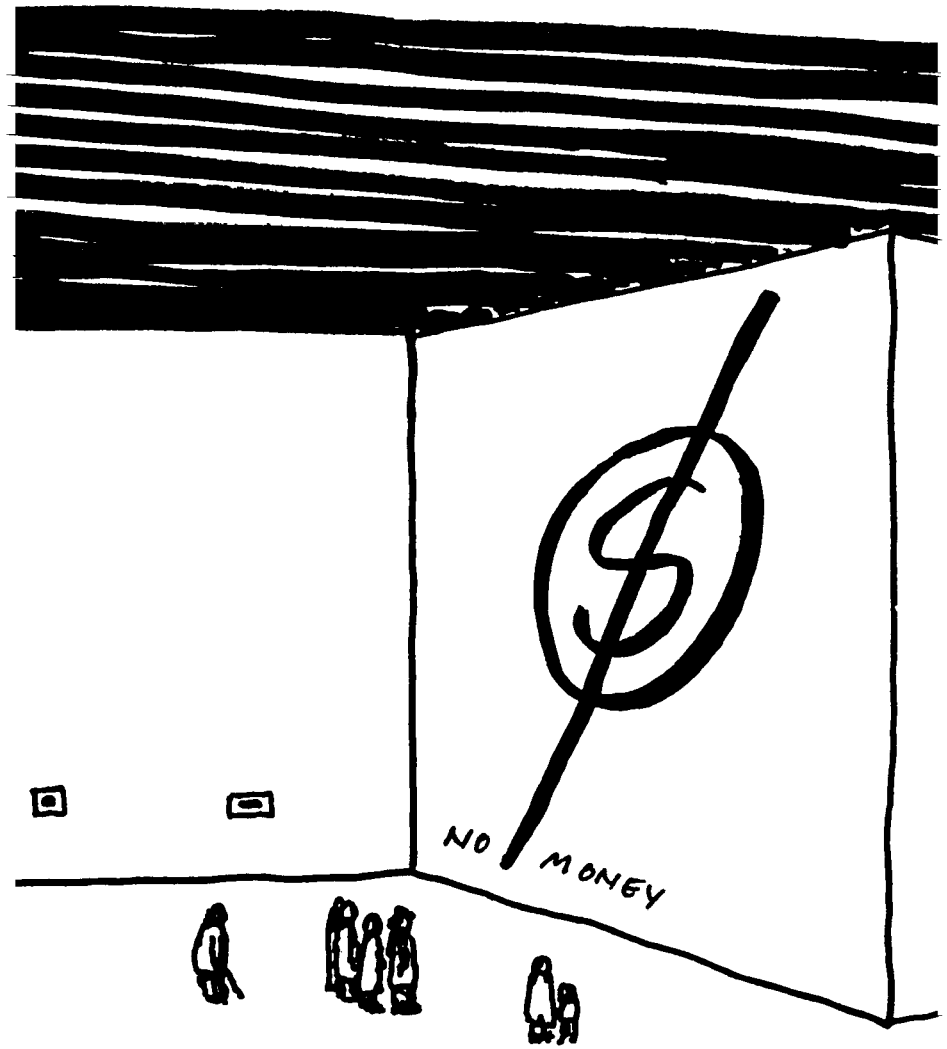
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



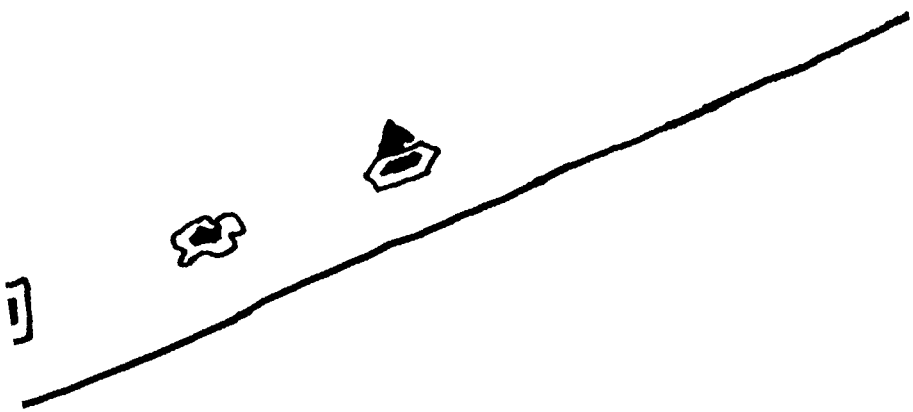
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Stories by Padgett Powell

Mr. Irony

I am a student of low-affect living edged with self-deprecating irony.

I am a character of lower-affect living a bit on edge with Mr. Irony, a self-deprecating therapist.

A therapist of self-deprecation, teaching the presumptuous among us to edge ourselves with irony until we can be said to be low-affect burghers of the modern world, appropriate denizens of the modern world, Mr. Irony sits on the edge of the sofa smoking with his leg crossed over his knee after the fashion of a lady crossing her leg over her knee, not after the fashion of a man crossing his etc., a manly configuration suggesting, from above at least, more the figure *4* than Mr. Irony's position does. Mr. Irony's position—smoking and bouncing his shoe in front of him, in the air in front of him, his shoe edged with the black trim applied by the black man at the barber shop with a toothbrush—suggests a pair of scissors more than a figure *4*. His legs cut in slight snips the airy fabric of irony in the apartment around us.

Mr. Irony cuts a pattern of ironic air into certain pieces; they assemble on the carpet in no real order, to be sewn later into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a garment, a coat of irony perhaps, a just-reminiscent-of-Nehru shirt-jac not for sale in any but the most hip low-affect haberdasheries in the world. This coat Mr. Irony will edge with a piping of flamingo pink he has begun to remove absently from the sofa upon which he scissors.

I will be expected to wear the ironic shirt-jac edged with flamingo piping as part of my low-affect therapy *unless I do something. Doing something* is precisely against the grain of Mr. Irony's teaching, and yet if I were not resistant to becoming a low-affect self-deprecating character I would not *need* Mr. Irony to instruct me, and he is of course fully aware that pulling the piping for the jacket for me to wear in consummate humiliation—no. He is not aware, not aware that I am nervous about wearing the ironic coat. I must get Mr. Irony some wine, white wine, to occupy his hand that absently pulls the piping for the jacket. I shall tape the piping back into place. A ridiculous restoration that will crackle and fail, crackle and make Mr. Irony notice it with a particular, subtle smile. Then he will be aware.

He will be amused, tolerant of my device to not yet have to wear a late-Nehru jacket with flamingo edging in the irony-edged world. In my device to forestall the dismantling of the sofa he will see the natural Young Republican resistance to self-deprecating irony-edged low-affect living, and it will confirm his presence as my roommate and tutor, and he will scissor some more air, touch lightly the tape I've transparently tried to stop him with, sip his wine, think well of me. He has a good student who ever questions the development he seeks, a resistant student all the more worthy, for that resistance, of his efforts, and valuable to him, as are heathen to their converters for their very backwardness; a student who will come round, come round, come round in a swoon of faithful self-deprecation into the low-affect irony-feathered dance of life, the limbo of bending backward so far that no disappointment can get beneath you, no rug of unexpected loss, jerked, can ever surprise. "Things do not turn out well," Mr. Irony says.

"May I get you more wine?"

"More wine."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"More wine, sir."
"My man."
"May we look out the window at joggers, sir?"
"Fine plan."

Mr. Irony and I go out, for a lesson, to look at alligators. The alligators, located easily, display themselves, as if for our benefit, by walking about high-legged, out of the water, like dogs. "The crocodilian," Mr. Irony says, "the crocodilian is not a creature of irony." When Mr. Irony says *irony*, which he seldom does, he undergoes a phenomenon of nature, or of supernature: his edges recede and expand, almost at once, as if he *italicizes*. "The shark, by contrast, is a creature of irony." Again he shimmers, he *thins*, is momentarily less and more than he was as he spoke the words "The shark, by contrast, is a creature of." "In the gut of the shark you will find the license plate of the auto, the leg of the mannequin. Not so the gut of *alligator mississippiens*. In there," he goes on, "at best the golf ball, the turtle." The field trip is concluded.

All incidents roll off Mr. Irony's mind like a drop of the water of dailiness from the oiled back of the duck of time. Mr. Irony has taught me locutions like this.

"Just to try," he says. "To hone. To play. To discover."

"Mr. Irony."

"Yes?"

"Why? What does saying the oiled back of the duck of time exactly *do*—I mean, do for me as someone—"

"As someone seeking to edge himself with irony, put a self-deprecating piping around his minimal self-importance?"

"Yes, how does the playful locution do this?"

Mr. Irony will look at me over his glasses, a gesture I have come to know means that he disapproves of my questioning so bluntly; he is looking to see if perhaps I am not joking, hedging us up with feigned obtuseness. But, no, I am not: I am obtuse.

"*The oiled back of the duck of time* does not precisely itself *do anything*. Whence it wends our way?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, I said it, or thought it."

"You can make money and be famous if you *write* what you say or think, and the difference is therefore enormous."

"Yes, sir. I wrote that incidents fall from your mind as drops of daily water from the duckback of time."

"Not bad, that. You changed it somewhat."

"Thank you, sir."

I invited Mr. Irony on a trip around the world. "I'm sure you've been, of course," I said.

"Be less sure," he said.

"What's that mean, sir?"

"Means, mostly."

"You don't care to go, then?"

"Didn't say that."

Mr. Irony was irritable. I leveled his glass with wine from the coldest part of the refrigerator. The colder, the less likely he is to deem it vinegar. I considered dropping the subject of world touring until he perked up. All subjects except perking up, in fact, and that subject never to be broached. The coldness of the wine made Mr. Irony open his mouth and extend his head forward as if he were a goose about to honk.

"For two?"

"Excuse me?"

"You spoke of taking Magellan's cruise, I believe. *For two*?"

"Yes, sir. Unless—"

"—?"

"I could get more tickets. $1.50 each."

"Most reasonable. Do tell."

"Pulled them from *Duke*, sir. Man at His Best just reads the travel section, and these, perforated in the binding, are his world-tour tickets, sir. Two tickets, $3.00 magazine. Man at His Best."

"You said that. Play a joke, as a ball in golf, *once*."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Irony sat regarding this proposition in the attitude of one regarding no proposition at all. This was part of the method, and I confess there may be more to it. It is possible

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Irony was regarding the proposition with his entire being, or with ten percent, while the other ninety percent was regarding all the things tangential to talking with a student. *Optic yellow tennis balls* might well have been at the center of his brain.

"Not easy to do, I know," he said, apparently referring to the golf-ball conceit, and, if so, demonstrating a rare instance of tutorial sympathy. I took advantage of the soft-looking moment.

"Do you care to go or *not*, sir?"

"Care to go."

"More tickets, then?"

"Two more'd be nice."

"For your wife, sir, and—"

"Not my wife. Not my wife. And not my wife."

"Anyone *in* mind, sir?"

"Not yet. What is the mode of travel?"

"Varies, sir."

"—?"

"Unspecified, sir. On the ticket: *unspecified variable means of transport.*"

"Makes one rather reconsider the wife," he said, scissoring his leg. He was feeling considerably better. "Short of planes that land too hard, nothing more pleasing to me, less to the wife, than transportation that doesn't work."

"Minimizes the self-importance of the individual, sir?"

"Naturalmente."

"You'd best," Mr. Irony said before we purchased our extra tickets, "you'd best make sure that *Duke* allows Men at Their Best to travel with women."

"Right," I said. He had a point.

I checked the matter. The women I spoke with at *Duke* assured me that the $1.50 world-tour ticket would be honored without respect to sex. I got us another two tickets, and Mr. Irony and I went down to the International Hostelry for Available Traveling Women.

At the International Hostelry for Available Traveling Women we were abruptly led to a gymnasium filled with cots and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

women. We were received, on the floor, not unlike visitors to a dog pound. A few women remained still, a few showed us minor interest, but most jumped up and wagged themselves violently at us. "I've seen this spectrum of behavior in a whorehouse in Texas," Mr. Irony remarked, not ostensibly looking at any of the women.

Out of a sense of courtesy, I looked at the women. They were, most of them, beautiful. I felt, in fact, as if I were drowning before a replay of all the missed sexual opportunities of a lifetime.

"Gravid with heat in here," Mr. Irony said.

"Yessir."

Some of the women leapt up, approached us; others held back, deliberately diverting themselves; others remained indifferent. "Flat on their backs, those two," Mr. Irony pointed out, indicating in a corner two supine figures on cots. Beneath their cots, packed backpacks: two neat bundles, in distinct contrast to the sloppy, strewn, dorm-room environs of the cheerier, aggressive women.

"Be polite among Harpy as I steer us to the Defeated Ones," Mr. Irony instructed. This I did, occasionally shaking hands, as Mr. Irony tug-boated us to the corner of the absolute uninterest.

We stood between the two cots looking at two broad-hipped women in cotton shirts. They were similar enough to be sisters: square faces, full lips, wide eyes.

"You girls healthy?" Mr. Irony asked.

"I'm as fine as frogs' hair and she's right as rain," one of them said, motionless.

"Be down," said Mr. Irony. "Do you cost more, or come with liabilities, or strings, or whatever, for this sour demeanor which wins a sane man?"

The woman who had spoken looked at her companion.

"No," the companion said.

" 'Tis settled, then," Mr. Irony said. "We court you." He turned to me. "This would be my opinion *extempore* regarding world-traveling companions. You have a voice in the matter."

"Mr. Irony," I said, pulling him a bit out of earshot, "ordinarily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I would hesitate to differ, would automatically defer to your experience. But I confess to have wanted twenty women in here more than these. *But.* Now I'm won. These are the girls one finds in a suburban cowboy club, looking for love. They are of good stock, well-bred, well-heeled in the moral zone but not without appetites one could call—"

"It's wonderful you are filled with ideas, son. Keep them to yourself."

Mr. Irony turned to the women. "Ladies, a world tour?"

They hit the floor, boots on.

We made arrangements to meet them later. On the way out, Mr. Irony turned to me and said, "Unless I miss my mark, these girls don't expect things to turn out well. My kind."

"They'd better not," I said.

This was the sort of obtrusive remark Mr. Irony ignores. I was having more and more trouble getting in a word edgewise. It was making me sullen rather than ironic.

First stop, on the cliffs of Acapulco, the girls stand, nipples spiked up in the salty breeze, as Mr. Irony prepares to make the 140-foot dive into the swells. "One of the more challenging stretches of your *Duke* world tour," our *Duke* brochure tells us.

"If he can do it," my Traveling Woman says, "I can do it, and I can do it *nekkid*."

Mr. Irony takes deep breaths. I read to him from the brochure: "You must determine the seventh and largest swell of the series and count to seven once it clears the large rock on the left. Don't look back, and keep it tight."

"That it?"

"That's it, sir."

"And grap your cajones, señor," a local boy adds, watching the spectacle of gringos with considerable excitation. Mr. Irony grabs himself, with two hands, before tumbling from the cliff in a spidery roll altogether suggestive of a horse taking a fall.

From the swell into which he exploded, we see Mr. Irony's red face surface, unquestionably smiling. The word *real* wafts to us, in reverb, seconds after we see his mouth open and close.

"Shit," my Traveling Woman says. "The turkey survived."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Grap your teeties," the boy tells her.

Atop elephants in Lanxang, we hear Mr. Irony say, "I am immortal. I have died a thousand deaths." I turn to acknowledge that I am all ears. "Of the imagination," he says, as we lurch over this small but important part of the world.

Each of us has grown accustomed to the odor of the elephant he rides but not to that of the *mahout* behind whom he sits. The Traveling Women, on the third and fourth elephants, have complained of this very thing.

"Deodorant would go a long way here," a Traveling Woman said.

"Or nowhere," the other Traveling Woman said.

Mr. Irony, in the lead, then approved of this sentiment with a pursing of his lips barely noticeable before his face filled with rare emotion, in time with the stepping of his elephant into a stream from the bank of which could be seen sliding crocodiles, or something that looked like crocodiles. I was given the lead, following the fording.

Lanxang is small but important because it is contiguous to—a bridge connecting, therefore—two other small and likewise important places of the earth. The smaller the place, we have come to note, on this tour, the more important. "What is a continent but spoonfuls of dirt?" Mr. Irony asked, early on, before the rest of us had arrived at this logic.

"Oh brother," one of the Traveling Women said. She became with that remark not Mr. Irony's but my Traveling Woman.

"Indulgences!" Mr. Irony proclaimed, his call to order for word jazz. He slapped his elephant's hide. "The head of my animal is a small V-8 engine covered by slab bacon."

"Fatback."

"Fatback with hairs."

"A hemi. A flat-head. Not a V-8."

"Who said that?" Mr. Irony asked. "The girl from Pampa or the girl from Borger?"

"The girl from Borger," the girl from Pampa said. "Her daddy raced."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Flat-head has some merit, indeed."

"Grey twelve-gauge Naugahyde," the girl from Pampa said.

"Fatback, grey-brown, boar-bristled, flat-head six underneath," said Mr. Irony.

"Never forgetting," said Pampa.

"An elephant's timing chain of memory never breaks," said Borger.

"We are astride some fine beast."

I don't indulge. I am beginning to doubt the wisdom of my appointment to Mr. Irony.

The tent was filled with censers and their various sweet smokes and we were sitting foursquare to a hookah in the middle.

Someone, holding breath, said, "What kind dope?"

Someone else, holding, shrugging, said, " 'on't know."

"Man at His Best," Mr. Irony intoned, "asks not what specie of intoxicant his hosts provide." Then he addressed the girl from Pampa. "Her daddy raced. What yours?"

"My daddy sat on his Texass in a Barcalounger size of a Lincoln." She pulled on the hookah. Mr. Irony studied her. With her lungs at full expansion, letting no smoke escape, she said: "Come I know Naugahyde."

In relation to elephants, to the canvas and skins around us and under us, Naugahyde was a mysterious thing to think about just then, and Mr. Irony accordingly announced "Indulgences!" and slapped a provision crate with sufficient speed and force that everyone exhaled, losing smoke.

Spontaneously, my girl from Pampa indulged: "He was a lardass from the gitgo. Had all he ever wanted so all he wanted was to git rid of that and git shit he didn't want. We had land, oil, stock, and three TV's in a wall-bank, like Elvis and Lyndon. The recliner had motors in it like a hospital bed—drive it around, too. Vibrated, heated up, everything. Air brakes. It came in leather. Then he heard about Naugahyde. Had to have it. Drove the lounger down to the upohster's, rip rap."

"One is cautioned by all sense against becoming fond of an Available Traveling Woman," Mr. Irony said. "Damned if the temptation does not accrue."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who?" his girl from Borger said. "Her? Shoot. She's a card. I coulda tole y'all that."

"Had a *refrigerator* in it, under his ass."

We started laughing then, unstoppable dope laughter, fueled on knowing there's nothing so finally funny enough to cause such paroxysms. *To the upohster's* someone kept repeating as we came up for air, sending us back under again. We were prostrate in a tent carpeted of animal hides, noses in fur, thinking of Naugahyde, unable to breathe.

At Jack London's Trading Post and Juice Bar/Trail Foods, Inc., we outfit for a brief walk on what *Duke* details as "the tundra."

"The parka with Raglan sleeves for me, I favor Lord Raglan," Mr. Irony tells a clerk. "Anoraks for the anorexics," he says, with an impatient wave at the Traveling Women, who ignore him. They are feeling the goods: the down-filled, the corduroy, the leather, siliconed, mink-oiled.

Dressed out, fat as bales of cotton, we look not unlike designer astronauts, and we clod into the Juice Bar, where we all four enjoy White Fang Smoothies before stepping out on the tundra.

"Tundra? I've led *cheers* on ground worse'n this," a Traveling Woman says. "In Pampa."

"Just enough bad ground to scuff up our moon boots, ladies," Mr. Irony says. "That's the objective here, I daresay. Man at His Best not to be seen in *new shoes*."

Riding a Galapagos tortoise, Mr. Irony says, "I do not recall ever feeling so at home."

The tortoise's head, high up, looks altogether different from Mr. Irony's head, which is only a bit larger and a little higher than the reptile's. Mr. Irony's knees are up also, his cowboy boots in carved notches of the carapace.

"It seems to me all we do on this *Duke* tour is ride things, jump off things, slip and bust our ass on things," one of the Traveling Women says.

"Man at His Best," the other offers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Komodo dragons next, ladies. Flesh-eaters," Mr. Irony says. They do not respond. They have read ahead the literature and know that we are scheduled to ride no dragons. Next we dance in grass skirts before tourists drinking drinks from coconut shells, dance across an atoll.

Mr. Irony's reptilian steed stops to graze on what looks like a small cabbage. Mr. Irony sits side-saddle, lights a cigarette. "These old boys know what they are about. I would not presume to hurry the duocentenarian." The tortoise eats with surprising waste, cabbage bits at times even on top of his head. "It is possible," Mr. Irony says, watching him scatter his meal, "to hazard another end for the dinosaur: inefficient table dexterity."

"I shall inquire if one is permitted to own for himself so measured a hedon," Mr. Irony says. "I shall walk him in Central Park, *at night*."

"Mr. Irony, what is your position on The Good Ole Days?"

"What you mean?"

"I get the notion, from no particular event, that when one is correctly minimalized and hedged up with self-deprecating irony, et cetera, that one doesn't—can't, by definition—afford to care about The Good Ole Days."

"I don't understand you," Mr. Irony says.

I take this for an evasion. I am onto something but I have asked it too directly—I have asked it *at all*.

This whole business of his sitting with such fondness on a two-hundred-year-old turtle is a way, as I see it, of disowning a more recent time, a time, say, of tricycle-sitting sullied somehow by a dominating father; a time after which boyish enthusiasms became adolescent agonies became adultish early losses and defeats, leading Mr. Irony to the defensive position of assuming that things don't turn out well. Sitting astride a dinosaur confirms him, proves in a tacit cabbage-bashing fashion that The Good Ole Days are the fluff of myth. The truth for Mr. Irony is extinction, a brief run through the ironic daily maze and not dying *yet*. On his tortoise, Mr. Irony looks as composed and serene as an underfed Buddha.

"You been having both the women?" he suddenly asks.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sir! Both got in my tent, both—well, pleasured. But the seed only in one."

"Still, you put your trocar in mine, too."

"Yes, sir. It's—"

"Understandable. My fault. I shall seek to win back my Available Traveling Woman shortly."

"Good, sir. I—"

"Shut up."

For three days we live in enamel tubs, under steamed towels, on massage tables, in Hot Springs, Ark.

"This is geezerhood, but it's nice, but it's still geezerhood," the Borger Traveling Woman says. After the second day, Pampa says, "I feel like a grub."

Mr. Irony has acquired a laboratory wash-bottle, one liter Nalgene, which he fills with vodka before a day in the baths, and when an attendant instructs him to drink the hot spring water ("to warm your *in*sides") from a proffered folding paper cup, Mr. Irony produces from the tub of 110° water in which he reposes the wash bottle—he smiles and squirts a stream of hot vodka in, nodding the attendant away.

"Nice rig," Borger comments.

"Germ-free," Mr. Irony instructs.

Mr. Irony does not attain the parboiled look we three have, and his step is sharp, his stride long. The rest of us, mineralized and boiled and sober, veer along softly.

"Now I feel like one of those catfish that live in caves," Pampa says after the third and final day in steam.

"The white ones, dear?" Mr. Irony asks.

"White, *blind* ones, *dear*." She looks around, suspicious of Mr. Irony's term of affection. The Traveling Women share a low-lidded squint with one another. *Something fishy.*

In a bar across from the grand row of baths, Mr. Irony declares that he will help us. "I propose to restore you to your electrolytical feet. Allow me." He orders a pitcher of vodka and three ponies of liqueurs for us each. "Sup at these as you would side dishes. This," Mr. Irony says, lifting the pitcher, "is the roast beef."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In fifteen minutes we are well along onto our electrolytical feet. The Traveling Women are crying with affection for Mr. Irony, hugging him, and I cannot shake the sensation that I am an eel. Mr. Irony tenders a speech. "Ladies, forgive me my earlier curtnesses with you. I meant no harm. Sexism is, if you will, etiological."

"Do what?"

"A long time ago," Mr. Irony says, "a crocodile bit a hippopotamus by the nose and effected, *voilà*"—Mr. Irony touches his nose and slides his arm away from him into space, trombone style—"an elephant."

The Traveling Women enjoy a look of profound eye-widening comprehension. "And elephants *don't forget*," they say, nearly in unison.

"Precisely. And I am sorry," Mr. Irony says, bowing his head. With *tears* the Traveling Women look at him, and they hug each other.

"Mr. Irony," I manage to say, "were the liquid in me not absorbed into cottony cells, had I fodder at all, sir, if I felt like anything but a starved moray eel, I'd throw up."

"Hedge up, boy. Minimalize your self-importance. Limn with humility."

"Rock breaks scissors," I say, feeling my way, speaking automatically. "Scissors cut paper. Paper covers rock. Poon breaks irony."

Mr. Irony purses his lips, looks at the end of his cigarette, as if waiting for my tirade to end. "Not bad. Keep it to yourself."

"Mr. Irony, have you been bitten hard?"

"Elucidate."

"The—the Ingenue thing. There are, apparently, life's Ingenues and life's Vietnam Boys, and—"

"The inconsequential and the consequential?"

"Yes, sir. The bitten-hard."

"The bitten-hard. I see, now. I see."

We are in hot-air balloons, jetting on a blue plume activated by a pullcord over desert. Mr. Irony watches the ground

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

carefully to spot something at which a ballast bag might be thrown. "I would not counsel your courting the hard bite," he says. "Is that a shack?"

"Looks like it, sir."

"Bombs away." The flour sack speeds in a miraculous arc down to the tin roof of the shack and strikes with a sound not unlike a child striking an oatmeal box. "Gabby Hayes should dash out in a state of confusion, precisely, *now*," Mr. Irony says. As we drift away, no one emerges from the shack. "He consumed—that prospector—too much red-eye last night." We are in a silent, unfired drift, only the creaking of the basket to be heard.

"I have the feeling," I say, "that there are hard-bitten folk walking around with a certain advantage over those of us who haven't had . . . well—"

"Do people with one arm have a certain advantage over those with two? Yes, in a way: they know something unstandard. Same for the bitten brain, the psychological one-arm. But, son, listen: irony will not survive the bite, the truly hard bite."

Mr. Irony shimmers at the word, perhaps more clearly than I've seen him shimmer before, because, I think at the time, of the clear desert air and our altitude.

Mr. Irony hefts up another bag. "You may be *silly*, on the one hand, or *wounded*, on the other, but you do not *elect* to be wounded. Is that a *dune buggy*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Helmets on 'em?"

"Looks to be, sir."

"Your shot."

I let the bag go and it hits the desert in a broadening white puff.

"Missed by a quarter mile, I'd say," Mr. Irony assesses.

"It's a moving target, sir."

"And from a moving gun."

"It's the girls, I think."

"Hand me a bag."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Following a column of pronghorn sheep, Mr. Irony, angular and bearded, looks not unlike a common goat chasing its betters.

"We'll never shoot one of them things," Pampa says.

"We're not supposed to," Mr. Irony impatiently declares, sighing, stepping carefully up the rocks. "We're supposed to tire and drop our rifles from fatigue and descend to the lodge with our blisters." There are tiny radio transmitters on the rifles which would seem to corroborate Mr. Irony's assessment of what we're to do on *Duke*'s Man-at-His-Best Sheep Safari. There's a curious footnote in the brochure: "If hunters wish, they may, as in recent American combat experience, jettison their weapons."

"Thing to do," Mr. Irony says, "is put these damned cannon someplace they can't get to with the helicopter—make 'em hike in."

"Chap some ass," Borger says.

"Chap some ass," Pampa adds.

"Chap some ass," Mr. Irony says.

As the sheep continue to move vertically, their powerful bushy rumps just out of range, we turn laterally and head for a close-looking space between two peaks. Mr. Irony says: "Mine shaft'd be nice."

We were given the opportunity to choose means of transport during the next leg of *Duke*'s Man-at-His-Best World Tour. The territory to be crossed was Georgia and South Carolina, south to north. We could take I-95 with a life-insurance salesman who had once been an oil-rigger and then had tried to be a bass guide for Roland Martin, or we could take back roads in a log truck with a crew of pulp wooders. *Duke* said, "Excuse the indelicacy, but in local parlance these fellows, black or white, are known as pulp-wood niggers, and they stink to high heaven, have potted meat and Mellow Yellow for lunch, do not visit dentists." There was no question which Mr. Irony would choose, and we were not surprised to see Borger and Pampa pile into the insurance salesman/bass guide's 4x4

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Blazer Silverado with smoked glass all around. As the doors closed, we saw the salesman spray a shot of Binaca into his mouth.

"His hairdo was not unreminiscent, was it, of Woody Woodpecker?" Mr. Irony asked.

"I thought so myself," I said, and I had, precisely. The coiffure looked artificially blown up, almost teased, into a top knot at the front of the fellow's head, and it was in fact carrot-colored. Mr. Irony and I, by this sight, were reassured that we had made the correct choice of transport. We sat together on the cooler of beer *Duke* had advised us to prepare for our ride with the pulp-wood niggers, patient in our waiting, for *Duke* had also advised that, though we would arrive at the destination (Dillon, S.C.) well before the insurance salesman would have gotten us there, we might depart up to two hours later.

The pulp-wood niggers were three. The driver was white, wearing a blue mesh cap that read, "I'm a Rebel and Damn PROUD OF IT." At shotgun was a black with his hair plaited into spikes over which he had tied a black nylon scarf in Arab fashion, with two nylon tails down his back. "Healthy looking individual," Mr. Irony remarked of him. "Got them Husqvarna arms." In the middle of the seat was a suggestion of human form, as a cicada hull on a pine tree suggests an insect. He was chinless, chestless, slumped down bleary-eyed between his larger colleagues. We came to learn he was "the oiler," by which title was signified his entire *raison d'être*: when the other two ran equipment, he carried and administered the lubricants. If it were chainsaws, he carried a pistol-style oil can, squirting the hot blades, muttering every time, "Self-oilers don't work *for shit*."

The driver, with a motion of his thumb, indicated we were to get on the truck flatbed. We got aboard and were arranging ourselves on the boat cushions we bought with the cooler when the cab rear window slid open and the oiler extended both arms through it. Mr. Irony and I managed to interpet this, and I handed the oiler two cold beers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Fatherlaw died last week," he said, pulling back into the cab with the beer. With a jolt we were off.

Several miles down the road his arms came back through the window, and he was delivered two more beers. "Wife daddy died," he said, going back in.

Through a rare, obvious communion, Mr. Irony and I were clearly taking extreme pleasure in the ludicrousness of our scene, glancing squarely and without expression at one another during these utterances from the oiler. We were bouncing clear off the truck, on a clay road that now had over it behind us a cloud of dust as far as we could see.

We braked to a halt, and while Mr. Irony and I were still struggling for balance, the driver and the black guy were pissing in the road beside open cab doors. "Pit stop," the oiler informed us, a bit gratuitously. We got off to piss.

Mr. Irony was boring into the clay in front of him when the black dude said to him, "Nice boots, homeboy."

"Thank you, sir."

"Pointy-like. Match your head."

"They do, sir."

"Spensive, bet. How much they coss, homeboy?"

"Three."

The oiler interrupted this discourse by letting himself out of the truck and collapsing on the roadside.

"*Lumpydaddydied*!" he said, rocking on the ground like a child in a crib. Mr. Irony bent to inspect the bereaved form.

"Pay no mine, homeboy," the black said to Mr. Irony. "He in moning. Would like them boots."

"For the asking, sir." Mr. Irony was already seated on the truck bed pulling hard on one of his Lucheses. It was this willingness, this anticipation, I think, that saved Mr. Irony's boots. The black looked with just a hint of surprise at Mr. Irony sitting unshod, swinging his socked feet.

"I just try 'em on, homeboy. You all right."

"Might I kick a few clods in those brogans?"

"Righteous. You bit crazy."

The two of them exchanged footwear, and the black walked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

awkwardly around, stopping with the boots under the prostrate, grieving face of the oiler.

"How these look on me, Taint?"

"Leave him alone, Rooster," the driver said. "Pick him up." He was smoking, leaning against the truck studying his calloused hands.

"How they look, Taint?" Rooster repeated.

"Lumpy daddy *died*."

Rooster leaned over, off balance, and with one arm picked the oiler up, setting him down on his feet hard, giving him the slightest steadying shake. "Get hole on yourself, man." The oiler suddenly reminded me of a creature I saw once in an aquarium that I thought merely remained still for a very long time and that I later discovered to have been all along dead, hollowed out.

The driver flicked his cigarette into the woods and got in the truck. "That fag magazine don't pay us *shit* for this *shit*. You boys get on."

Mr. Irony, who had been speaking with Rooster, unhooked the boom cable and Rooster released the winch. Mr. Irony pulled ten feet of cable out and got aboard with it. "Homeboy want him a seatbelt," Rooster said, to no one. He stuffed the oiler in the rider's door. "Homeboy I think may be hisself part nigger. Here. Peench like motherfuck anyway." Mr. Irony's Lucheses came through the rear window, and Rooster's brogans, loaded with beer, went in.

Mr. Irony put two half-hitches of cable around his waist and looked to me with a gesture offering some cable, which I declined. He took another half-hitch for himself and we settled in, looking backwards, for the ride to Dillon.

Once we had a head of steam and the dust trail behind us well up, Rooster's arm came through the window and touched the winch control. Mr. Irony put two beers in his jacket, felt his waist, took a deep breath, gave Rooster a thumbs up, and Rooster winched him free of the bed. He swung out and back, spinning, and settled bed-high beneath the log boom, blowing,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

turning, already taking on the color of clay, assuming the orientations of a sky diver, the expression on his face rapt.

Just before he disappeared for good into the thick clay air, Mr. Irony managed to face forward, horizontal, with arms out front, and shout, "*Super*man at His Best!"

"Life insurance is the best investment money can buy. You are investing *in your life*—and what could be a better investment than that? *What*?"

"Don't you have to *die* to cash in?"

"Alack! No, ladies. That's a thing I read in a Shakespeare story. Nooo, ladies, *you do not have to die* to enjoy the extreme uncomparable benefits of cash-value life insurance. You may borrow against your policy, and it may mature and pay *before* you die, and—"

"What's this?"

"What?"

"It says, ODOR KILLER—CITRUS. AN ENTIRE ORANGE GROVE IN A BOTTLE."

"Hey! Don't squirt too much of that!"

"Open the windows for God's sake."

"Entire orange grove in an entire goddamn car."

"Well, I told you—"

"What's *this*? It *stinks*." Pampa sniffs a cardboard coaster suspended from the rearview mirror; on the coaster is a painting of a largemouth bass.

"Air freshener," the life insurance salesman says.

"*Fish* air freshener?"

"Well, no. It's—"

"Here's some Eau de Paris—NOIR."

"*That's* expensive."

"Oh!"

"Windows! Stop that shit, Borger," Pampa says.

"What *is* all this crap?" Borger asks.

"Yeah. Are we in the presence of a *complex* here?"

"No, I just like to keep my car spotless. I live in this car—work in this car fifteen-sixteen hours a day."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, it doesn't have to smell like a whorehouse."

"Well—you know how sometimes a car just gets an *odor* in it that . . . doesn't go away?"

"*No*," Pampa says.

"*No*," Borger says.

"You know, kind of *under* things?"

"*No*."

"*No*. God. Did he *fart*?"

"Heysoos. I get the picture. Spot of ORANGE GROVE up here, Borger."

A stop is made for urination all around. Mr. Irony, whose clay-caked face resembles a terracotta mask, declines to unwinch and pees from the Superman position.

"Look mom, no hands," he says.

Rooster says to me, "That is one *traz*y white man."

The oiler heads for the ditch in a mincing wobble and appears to start to wilt when Rooster suspends him by the back of the shirt. "And he *still* dead, Taint," Rooster whispers to him, shoving him back toward the truck. "Pitiful. Pitt-ee-full."

"Load my bomb bays, kind sirs," Mr. Irony calls.

Responding as to a regular call for work-a-day lubrication, the oiler pulls himself to with a big sniff and hurries to Mr. Irony with two more cold beers, which Mr. Irony instructs him to slip into the pockets of his jacket.

"You will surmount your troubles, son," Mr. Irony says to him. "Your wife's father died and he will remain dead, as Mr. Rooster has so sagely informed you. The world means you no harm. Be brave, be brave, and be strong." Mr. Irony makes a gesture in the air that suggests a blessing and that throws him out of the Superman orientation, and we fire up and are off in a scratch of rock and rubber and clay, Mr. Irony in a spinning circle-within-a-circle boomerang motion.

"Well, thing is, see, she's a young girl—big girl, you girls would like her, being as you're from Texas and all, fine state, did my time out there yesiree on rigs outside Odessa, nice folk,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hospitalitywise—she's young, Debbie, and *absolutely in love w'me*, see—she's never been that before so she's, like, skeptical."

"We trust you encourage her in that skepticism," Borger says.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"There they are," Pampa says.

In the parking lot of a boarded-up convenience store in the center of Dillon, S.C., is the log truck, and drinking beer are the blue-Rebel-capped driver, the crumbling oiler laughing with his head thrown back, Rooster, the student of low-affect living edged with self-deprecating irony, and, suspended yet from the boom, orange as a kapok lifejacket head-to-toe, Mr. Irony himself.

"Is that your not-husband?" Pampa asks Borger.

"Goose by any other name," Borger says.

"Hey. What's the deal? That's a *dude*?" the insurance salesman asks.

"That's a dude, mister."

"Hey. *All right*. He looks like I could sell *him* some life insurance, you think? What you think? Worth a try *or not* or *what*!"

The life insurance salesman gets out of the smoked-glass Blazer and shakes down his pants legs over his Italian ankle boots and walks in a confident stride for Mr. Irony. Before he reaches him, Borger rushes to the orange horizontal figure with the hurried pumping vigor of a sailor's wife greeting her sailor after six months at sea, and she kisses the unbooted end of it fully upon its clay-caked crusty terracotta lips and says, "Oh, honey, you smell *good*!" and the life insurance salesman turns on his heel and retreats, his face a configuration of pure confusion.

Swatting handfuls of the thick, nearly leavened clay dust from himself in a three-quarter beat, Mr. Irony said, to the beat, in time, "Dark, dark candy; light, light pain; green, green fruit; trying, trying times."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is that a quote?" the driver asked.

"Yeah, I've heard that somewhere," the insurance salesman said. "Maybe Shakespeare."

"Do I detect shower stalls across the boulevard?" Across the street was a coin-operated car wash, to which Mr. Irony made a straight path, removing his boots as he went. He held the long water gun by its barrel, aiming it down at the top of his head, and with the insertion of a quarter engaged the works, disappearing into a vaporous high-pressure cone of suds and steam.

The rest of us stood about somewhat ill at ease. The oiler shortly had the presence of mind to offer Pampa and Borger a beer, and we adjusted into as comfortable a group as we could standing around a log truck drinking beer in a shut-down convenience-store parking lot watching Mr. Irony shower in a carwash. I personally felt negligible, and had for some time, and thought to remove myself from the affair, at least as a *dramatis persona*, it being arguable whether I was contributing much toward my narrative end of the stick; further arguable whether I would ever be able to demonstrate in telling fashion that I had in fact picked up self-deprecating ironic ways from Mr. Irony, whose student I allegedly was, and who (Mr. Irony) was, having finished his shower, walking sopping wet into Bill's Dollar Store next to the car wash. I could serve the tale best, I thought, and finally not without considerable self-deprecation and irony, by removing myself from it, and decided thereupon to do so, and hereby pronounce myself expunged from this affair as teller—Pampa I intend to continue to have relations with, but that coupling is a private matter and is not to be hereafter mentioned. In point of fact, I had felt for two hundred butt-pounding rough miles that the oiler was the proper student of Mr. Irony, a figure of such un-ironic beginnings that something like true Biblical Salvation and conversion, if not a *bona fide* saintly transformation, was available to him if Mr. Irony attempted to bless him with the vision which would let him stop seeing as important his dead father-in-law and his life as minister of lubricant. Mr. Irony emerged from Bill's Dollar Store bearing gifts for the crew and for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Available Traveling Women and none for me—confirming me in my resolve to defect. A fair fare-thee-well to you all.

The presentation of gifts began with a stir—Mr. Irony presented Pampa and Borger with panty hose—"Apologies, ladies: not designer pants"—and persuaded them to don them in the cab of the log truck. When the women emerged, glossy-legged and matted, the crew and the insurance salesman all adopted a deliberately calmed-down demeanor like that of men in a bar before the storm of a barfight.

Mr. Irony presented the driver with a case of Skoal, a parti-colored welder's cap made of dungaree cloth, and a Buck knife which, as the driver reached for it, Mr. Irony threw into the adjacent wooded lot. "The knife is guaranteed for life, even against loss, sir." The driver donned his new cap, backwards, took a big pinch of Skoal, pocketed the fresh tin of snuff on his butt, looked sidelong at the panty-hosed women, and walked jauntily and juicy-lipped into the woods.

"A good man," Mr. Irony remarked. He pulled from a carton a model 44 Husqvarna chain saw, started it, cut the air after the fashion of a Shriner with a big sequined sword, and motioned to the oiler to come relieve him of the saw.

"I don't cut," the oiler shouted over the saw.

"You cut," Mr. Irony bellowed back. "Cut that billboard down." Mr. Irony allowed the saw to idle.

"Taint gone fuck hisself *all* up," Rooster said.

"Mr. Rooster," Mr. Irony said, "shut the fuck up. Taint *ain't*."

The oiler, carrying the saw somewhat apprehensively, at arms' length, addressed the billboard on which a candidate for sheriff promised to restore law and order to Dillon County, and cut through the first creosote pole with a clean, flexed, low turn of his body, one with the saw, and stepped to the next pole in the same crouch, and to the next and the next, and the candidate for sheriff fell on his face into the parking lot, blowing full beers off the log truck and crushing the insurance salesman's Blazer.

"Oh shit," the salesman said. The parking lot began to smell of perfume. "Oh God."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh boy," Borger said.

"Yes, ma'am," Pampa said.

"No event is unplanned for the intelligent purveyor of insurance, is it, sir?" Mr. Irony said to the insurance salesman.

"What?"

"The readiness, I believe, is all, sir?"

"Not—not *cars*. I sell life insurance."

"Receive your gratuity, sir." Mr. Irony handed the salesman a boxed leisure suit the color of green mint dinner candies and a gun-style hair dryer. The suit had contrasting yellow stitching and the blower a barrel the size and shape of a grenade mortar, the opening of which the salesman was measuring with his spread hand. "Damn! I can *get* another car!" he suddenly said. "No problem! Hey!" He passed his fist into the hair dryer.

The oiler dropped the chainsaw on the truck bed and opened two beers, taking a sip from each. He sat on the truck bed beside the saw and crossed his legs with an odd, pensive, pursed-lip expression on his face. Mr. Irony addressed him.

"You *do* cut, sir, and with *élan*."

"My knee start to give out on me."

"Understandable. You were configured as low and sturdy as Johnny Bench."

"*Down* there, wudden I?"

"Yessir."

"Got to fish sometime, right?"

"Right on."

"Can't cut bait all your life."

"No, sir."

"Can't cut bait all your life, right?"

"You are right."

"Taint gone mess *up*," Rooster said.

"I ain't t*ee*ther," Taint said.

"Mr. Rooster," Mr. Irony said, "Mr. Taint is in a rehabilitative power drive that needs no gainsaying."

"That his saw?"

" 'Tis."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Gone give me them boots, homeboy?"

"Gone give you a boom box, mother."

From Bill's Dollar Store, a credenza-style home entertainment center is wheeled out on a four-wheel furniture dolly by two men who struggle over curbing to keep the dolly under it.

"That thing is seven foot *long*," Rooster said.

"Big enough for a boog like you," Taint said.

"You put that affair on your shoulder and it is yours. I have had it converted to 12-volts. Batteries included."

"Batteries?"

"2 Die Hards in the TV compartment, wired parallel."

"You *traz*ee."

"Hoist it up, Mr. Rooster."

"This some kind of *race* joke."

"Might be."

"Hey, Rooster. So what?" the oiler said to Rooster. "*So fucking what?*"

"You done mess that boy *up*," Rooster said to Mr. Irony.

Mr. Irony and the two Bill's Dollar employees and the oiler got under one end of the home entertainment center and, like the Marines on the flagpole at Iwo Jima, shouldered it up to a sixty-degree angle. The oiler waved, impatiently, at Rooster to get under the giant radio.

Rooster obliged, shaking his head, and lifted the machine without noticeable strain. He took a step backward, kicking the dolly free, and hefted the home entertainment center an inch or two forward and backward for balance. He swung it, like a sail boom, through an arc, looking for the others.

"I'll say this to his *face*," the oiler says to Mr. Irony. "You are one buck nigger, Rooster."

"You right, Daddydied. Turn this thing *on*."

From the truckbed, the oiler leaned over and reached inside the long box and suddenly the lot was overwhelmed with a booming radio broadcast. Rooster started to jive. He got clear of the truck, clear of the billboard, everyone backed off to give him room, and he began a blaster walk, a walk of total indifference to the world, a series of steps and half-steps and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back-steps, around the parking lot of the closed convenience store in Dillon, S.C.

He circled back by the group, now holding its ears. "Don't want your boots now, homeboy. This all right," he shouted. To the oiler: "Okay, Taint. Don't call me a nigger ever again. You earn that first one."

"Ladies," he said, bowing slightly to the Available Traveling Women, the entertainment center tipping as slowly and heavily as a ship on a swell. "I'm going to go see some of the brothers." He left the lot in the gliding, halting, butt-clenching locomotion required of a proper dude beneath a seven-foot-long, two-hundred-pound, eighty-watt-per-channel, fake-walnut-veneer credenza-style home entertainment center.

Grease and oil—and that's not all, I do hydraulic and seals and packing leathers—grease and oil is very important. It is not just, as far as a lubricant. I believe it is like the blood of machines. Not the energy—that's your gas—but the blood, as far as life. M*achine* life. Saw life. Splitter life. Truck life. Backhoe life. And tools make men's life easier. Oil is the blood of the dirt. We buried Lumpy's daddy Saddy. I'm okay now.

I was not for a spot there. Then we carried a fellow on the log boom thew might all Georgia that said shape up and Rooster fucked with me and I just, I don't know, got right over it. He was, special to me, as far as almost being my own father, I thought sometimes.

My real daddy a preacher. But Lumpy daddy, before we even got married, one day he explained to me what viscosity means. That is a word I deal with. One day he give me a beer and a bowl of hot chili and he say, that, pointing to the beer, is not viscosity, and that, pointing to the chili, is vis*cos*ity. That might sound obvious to me now, but it was not obvious to me then. It was a hot chili, too. Lumpy daddy make a good chili.

I'm okay now.

Mr. Irony came to see me later that afternoon in Pampa's and my suite—Pepe's El Presidente Suite at South of the Border, where *Duke* recommends Men at Their Best recuperate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from logtruck carriage—came to me and asked that I not make myself so scarce, explaining that "things" need me. I asked him what that was intended to mean. He said again: "Well, things need you, son."

I pondered this a moment, and it occurred to me that he somehow knew of my decision to remove myself from this account of our world tour—I had not informed him of that decision; nor, for that matter, was he, I thought at the time, aware that there *was* an account. A character in a sombrero and serape jingled on spurs into the room where we sat and announced, "The senõritas expect youse for margaritas at the Acapulco Pulqueria Numero Three-a." We said okay. Mr. Irony handed him a fifty-dollar bill and he left with a flourish of his serape and a jingle of spurs.

"I was at risk, as your student, I thought. The oiler guy looked like he was better raw material."

"Pshaw. Never edge him up right. Buck him up, yes. Stop that damned whimpering, yes. But the proper attitude of self-unimportance would cast him back into the aquarium in which he died. He did resemble, as you noted, the decaying Plecostemus you found as a child that shocked you because you thought it, for weeks, merely *not moving*."

"Sir, you know everything I think?"

"Stop just short of everything."

"What don't you know, then? You said you stop short of—"

"You have had, I believe you confessed, My Traveling Woman while we've been Men at Our Best?"

"Yes."

"Well. There are certain *final things*, in the nature of excretions and animal noises and the quality of ardor, that I choose not to know."

"I see. But you *could*."

"I could."

"Because you are—is omniscient a meaningful term?"

"Left field. Nothing of the kind. *Happy hour*!"

With that Mr. Irony left the suite, headed for the Acapulco Pulqueria Numero Three-a.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Irony Renounces Irony

Mr. Irony renounced irony and took his place in line at Unemployment. Where once he would have found the tedium of the protracted process a delight, akin to the moves of a child's board game, he found the desk-to-desk ordeal—and getting in the wrong line, and then getting the right line to have it closed when he was one party from the bureaucrat serving it—officious, small-minded, forgiveless horseshit.

With a sheaf of papers so bulky that he longed for a briefcase to hold them in, he stood on one pained leg or the other lamenting his decision to quit irony. It left him uninsulated against the world, as if he had renounced drink or drugs instead. Despair came after him—with little tentacles it reached toward his balding head from the low fiberboard ceiling tiles of the Unemployment Office complex. "I rue the day I quit irony," he remarked to the woman behind him.

"I wish I hadn't quit Toys R Us," the woman said.

Despite himself, Mr. Irony felt a small thrill at her response. It was, with his remark . . . no, he was through with irony. Fourteen hours later, on their third shift of unemployment

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

counselors, the same woman spoke to him again: "Honey, you didn't really *quit* your job, did you?"

At this instant Mr. Irony conceived of his Desired Vocation, still a blank line on several of his multitudinous forms. He wanted to be a circus rider, a trick rider of horses going in a circle, standing on them, flipping backwards on them, maybe flipping backwards from one to the other . . . .

"I'm worrit about you, Mister," the woman was saying. "I don't think you know *the ropes*."

"Why not?"

"The way you *stan* there. You can' stan there that way, all tired like, if you ever done this before. We ain't begin to get *no*where. I'm fraid you *did* quit your job."

"Of *course* I quit my job," Mr. Irony said, worried that the woman had somehow detected his enjoyment from the irony of her quitting Toys R Us and his quitting irony.

"Child," she said, "you can' *quit*. You got to be *fire*. You *quit*, but you git them to *fire* your ass. You quit in your *heart*, but you git fire *on paper*."

"Maybe I was fired," Mr. Irony said.

"If you was, you *know*."

"Actually, I never really had a *job*, I had a—"

"Honey, none us ever had no *job*. Who want *that*?"

"I had a . . . style, you might say."

The woman looked at him with a grin. "You was some kind *pimp*, I bet. I like them miscegenational pimps—"

"No, madame, it's—"

"Hell. Don' get snitty."

It was going to be a hard life, Mr. Irony saw. Without something to fill the void left by the departure of his vice, he was going to be subject to humorless days until he got high on something else. Christ was out of the question precisely because He Himself contained no small measure of irony. Even getting high on "life itself" sounded inappropriately ironic. Only being a . . . *circus rider* made, at the moment, any kind of clean, unironical sense.

There would be no irony in standing on a horse, if you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could. And if the horse moved, in a circle, that was his business. And if you had to put on some tights and a sequinned vest and some special slippers, and the horse had to wear some flashy, colorful hardware, that was show business. He did not see how a man who had renounced irony could go wrong being a circus rider.

He began trying to fill in Desired Vocation on his forms against his thigh. The woman behind him bent over also to see what he was writing.

"Circus rider. That's a good one," she said. "You catchin on. You *never* get hire."

Even though there was a rich incense of irony about this woman and everything she said, Mr. Irony liked her. He looked at her fondly and she got down on her hands and knees.

"This the best part of Unemployment, honey. Put them foams on my back and write all you wont. It feels *good*. Don't poke *too* hard or you'll *come through*."

Mr. Irony did as he was told, and used the human desk as it and he moved incrementally toward their benefits.

Back at his apartment, Mr. Irony had a seizure, or something like a seizure. It was probably the equivalent of withdrawal anxiety common to boozers or druggers, only his fear was uncharted: he was sailing for the first time in the troubled, mundane waters of life without irony. It made him stand glumly beside the refrigerator, knowing that opening it and bending and looking at all the things—cruddy-lipped mustard jars, two olives in a tall bottle, a Baggie full of rotten parsley, a small German roach moving very slowly—that used to delight him in their queer combinations was not a pleasure open to him now. As a young man he had lost his women and lost his mind; as an older man he had lost money and his mind; now he had lost his irony, and it had never been this bad. Women and money were nothing to irony.

At the Unemployment office he had been denied benefits because he had had no employer. His case worker finally did not doubt that he might have been fired after reading his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aptitude questionnaire (under skills, Mr. Irony listed "left-handed"). When the issue of self-employment was broached, Mr. Irony denied stringently that he had been his own employer, a flatly ironic notion and one therefore not available to a reformed ironic. The entire affair—two days and six hours and forty-eight minutes from taking a number to being dismissed as ineligible for benefits—which once would have made his day, or week, was as disappointing as it would have been to the common fools down there trying to get something for nothing. He realized, finally, standing by the refrigerator, just before he opened it and *ate* the two olives and *scared* the roach and *squeezed* a green juice from the parsley Baggie, that *being down there* had been off limits; what was more ironic than getting paid for not working *only* if you could prove someone had deemed you *unsuitable* for working? Why couldn't you be paid for not working if you were *suitable*? Only the unfit benefit. It was not Darwinian. It was ironic. It had been, he saw now, a close call, close to a "slip" in the parlance of reforming abusers of substance and, he supposed it was fair to regard himself, abusers of style. He was a reforming abuser of style, a reforming ironic.

There were no books for him, no post- or pre-traumatic stress syndromes, no Adult-Children-of-Ironic-Parents groups to go to, no women counselors that spent their lives holding your hand if you'd had too much fun abusing something and now wanted as recompense to hold hands with idle women, no nothing. He was alone. He might have been on Mars. This gave him comfort. At least he was not in a herd of whiners who pulled out a poker chip and explained its significance before they told you their name. Mr. Irony resolved he would carry a cow chip before a poker chip, if that was not ironic—already, he was relieved to discover, he was not sure what irony was. A positive sign.

Still, he was pretty certain that extracting from the pocket in a somber, proud, ceremonious fashion and confidentially beginning to explain to an innocent bystander that what this cow chip represented was . . . irony—no, it would be better

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if he abjured *the word*. Perhaps he could, for a while, accept a substitute. Substitute therapy was common, even if it itself was perhaps a little ironic.

If he said, "I'm a reformed ironic, here's my cow chip, it's brown because—" that would be not ironic but silly. Yes. He might be in danger of descent into silliness if he employed *silly*, he thought.

He had recently witnessed a father and young daughter purchasing some candy for the mother's birthday. The child, who was allowed to select the candy, decided on chocolate-covered peanuts, and decided that they were "pretend poops." Indeed, the candies had looked like small, hard turds.

"But don't *tell* Mommy we're giving her pretend poops," the father instructed.

The child grinned wickedly. "It'll be . . . *pretty surprisey*!"

That, Mr. Irony thought, might be an acceptable substitute to *ironic*: *surprisey*. Irony he could quit, but, as methadone to his heroin, he could not quit that which was surprisey.

"Surprisey it is, then," he announced aloud, still leaning against the refrigerator, immediately looking less glum. He then crawled out of his own kitchen window and crawled back in. It felt good. He felt fine. Not himself, but all right.

"All surprising *right*," he said aloud, beginning a rubber-legged dance that came to him. He bandied this way through the apartment, saying "Surprise *you*!" to walls and paintings and furnishings. He told everything to surprise off. "Just get the surprise out of my way," he said to a pair of boxer shorts, and deftly toed them—through an incredibly long arc—into the clothes hamper. Suddenly, badly, he wanted a uniformed maid working full time in his small apartment, altogether too small for such a servant, and he wanted *all new clothes*.

Piling all of his old clothes into a heap, and thinking of how he might safely present himself at the haberdasher's *naked*, he paused to congratulate himself: not just any man could kick irony once it had its teeth in him. A lesser man, one less surprisey, would have failed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From Repetitions *by Yannis Ritsos*

The Choice

His companions fell asleep on the hawsers in the stern;
and she came, took him by the hand and led him
a little ways above the shore; she lay down beside him
and told him all, as a mortal might to her husband; she hid
nothing from him—
what difficulties he would run into, what precautions to take.
But,
at the most crucial point she gave him no advice at all,
just information. He had to decide on his own, she said,
and choose on his own (what choice was there
between two worst prospects?) Yes, on his own,
as he was in fact left, hanging like a bat from the wild fig tree,
above the black bowels of the empty depths, waiting
for the new quick exhalation of the sea,
on his own in his last jump into the ocean, and on his own later
clinging to his thunderstricken mast. That glory at least
was entirely his own—maybe the only one.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Achilles After Dying

He was very tired—who cared about glory any longer? Enough
was enough.
He had come to know enemies and friends—purported
friends:
behind all the admiration and love they hid their self-interest,
their own suspicious dreams, those cunning innocents.
Now,
on the little island of Leuce, alone at last, peaceful, no preten-
sions,
no duties or tight armor, most of all without
the humble hypocrisy of heroism, hour after hour he can taste
the saltiness of evening, the stars, the silence, and that
feeling—
mild and endless—of general futility, his only companions the
wild goats.
But here too, even after dying,
he was pursued by new admirers—usurpers of his memory,
these:
they set up altars and statues in his name, worshipped, left.
Sea-gulls alone stayed with him; now every morning they fly
down to the shore,
wet their wings, fly back quickly to wash the floor of his
temple
with gentle dance movements. In this way
a poetic idea circulates in the air (maybe his only justification)
and a condescending smile for everyone and everything crosses
his lips
as he waits yet again for new pilgrims (and he knows how
much he likes that)
with all their noise, their Thermos bottles, their eggs and
phonographs,
as he now waits for Helen—yes, that same Helen for whose
fleshly and dreamy beauty
so many Achaeans and Trojans (he among them) were
destroyed.

—translated from the Greek
by Edmund Keeley

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Elizabeth Macklin

There Is Still Water

There are still hammers, aren't there,
somewhere, and bricks dried in brick kilns?

Work has stopped for the winter,
never to start again.

Or it goes on behind closed doors,
till you see no sign of the seasons.

Pride seems to go with the baked loaf:
Tin rows of pans move like soldiers

into the ovens. The bakers wear masks. Even here
there is time enough to slip a word in.

All that we eat was fashioned
by someone.

Now snow follows the line of the railings,
as if to prove winter. Across the avenue

an I-beam flies on a crane line.
No other motion there captures the eye:

this newest building will be done that soon,
built, like the evangelical world, by no one.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is still water, a river,
moving down either side of the city—

or does it disappear, like a right, too,
when no one is watching?

Elsewhere craftsmen have uncovered their faces,
have made themselves known, and none too soon.

As if spring. Work as they tell you.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What Now

is coming from the hunters' woods
with open hands, allowing

everything new. What now seeks needs
to satisfy. Each bough

sheds gold scent on those hands in beads
of resin. Each wet shower

of clean snow off the branches fills a riverbed
for the thirsty. No, no drought

this year. What now takes care. What now has made
a lasting truce with the wide sky. How

can it come about? A slow, vast generosity has loaded
the earth with treasure and what now.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kathleen Norris

A Prayer to Eve

Mother of fictions
and of irony,
help us to laugh.

Mother of science
and the critical method,
keep us humble.

Muse of listeners,
hope of interpreters,
inspire us to act.

Bless our metaphors,
that we may eat them.

Help us to know, Eve,
the one thing we must do.

Come with us, Muse of exile,
Mother of the road.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Baron Wormser

Listening To a Baseball Game

for Charles Baxter

The smothering heat of a July night
Squats in a second floor bedroom
And doesn't move despite the desk fan's
Peaceful whir and simulate breeze.
A boy lies on the sheets and reads
A *Life* magazine which holds
The proper shadow of attention
While he listens to the ballgame
Being played in Kansas City.
He sees it happen and imagines it—
The same thing really. A car swings

Down Maple Street, a hinge complains.
Moths move toward decipherable light
But are stopped by screens. The boy's done
Reading and lies there beside the lamp
His hands folded beneath his head.
He knows that comfort is rarely pure.
He listens and lets his feelings glide
With each intent description.
He follows a probable dream
As the night sways with outcomes
In houses and rooms and far away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

To Happiness

Warm abstraction, glimmer and fruit
Of progress, hope and comfortable psychology
We forgive the promises of love, drugs and dieting
For the chance to grasp your swift eternities,
Then complain unstoically

Refusing to greet embodiment as an honest cheat,
The inventor of spurious memories and swank proclivities
Who declares that delight may be arraigned without
The shadow of pain. A lie we believe readily
Then complain unstoically.

What agonies attended your various births?
The soul must die for you to live palpably;
Moments must assume cinematic immortality:
The cheap tricks that mobs sensually applaud
Then complain unstoically.

Perhaps "pursuit" was the sum of your wisdom,
The premise of earthy significance granted
But left undefined, each citizen free
To move from place to beckoning place
Then complain unstoically

About bad luck, mosquitoes, panics, thieves,
The heirs of the flesh the Bible detailed fully.
The Bible was a black book consulted regularly
By parishioners who sought solace, if only to
Then complain unstoically

That practical pleasure had mainly failed them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Irrelevant sprite, your ascension describes the arc
Of modern despondency, the rigors of mechanical
Vigor etched hauntingly in faces who
Then complain unstoically

To strangers about time's petaled taunts.
We would savor abandonment, go about our business,
And reply to questions on the telephone
That we are states of being who somehow digress and
Then complain unstoically.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by James Laughlin

My Instructions

Make It Simple

make it so simple a child
of six can understand the

words (if not the sense)
then take out all the words

that aren't doing anything
useful so Ezra instructed me

breaking the point of his
pencil as he stabbed at

the offending words and
Bill told me also to make

it simple as simple as
something you might see

walking down Ridge Road
to the drugstore whatever

you see with your own eyes
can be real but make what

you saw as plain as you can.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With a Cold Flame

boil it down said Ken-
neth try to reduce it

to a skeleton or to a
tiny crystal but a

crystal reflecting light
let there be few edges

in its shape no more than
those in a grain of sand

boil it down but boil
it with a cold flame.

Pound/Williams/Rexroth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Out in the Pasture

the sheep have formed
a nibbling ring around

the old horse all they
do is munch grass but

it's like a conversation.

&

two newborn lamb twins
have lain down near the

mother ewe they're tired
from sucking because she

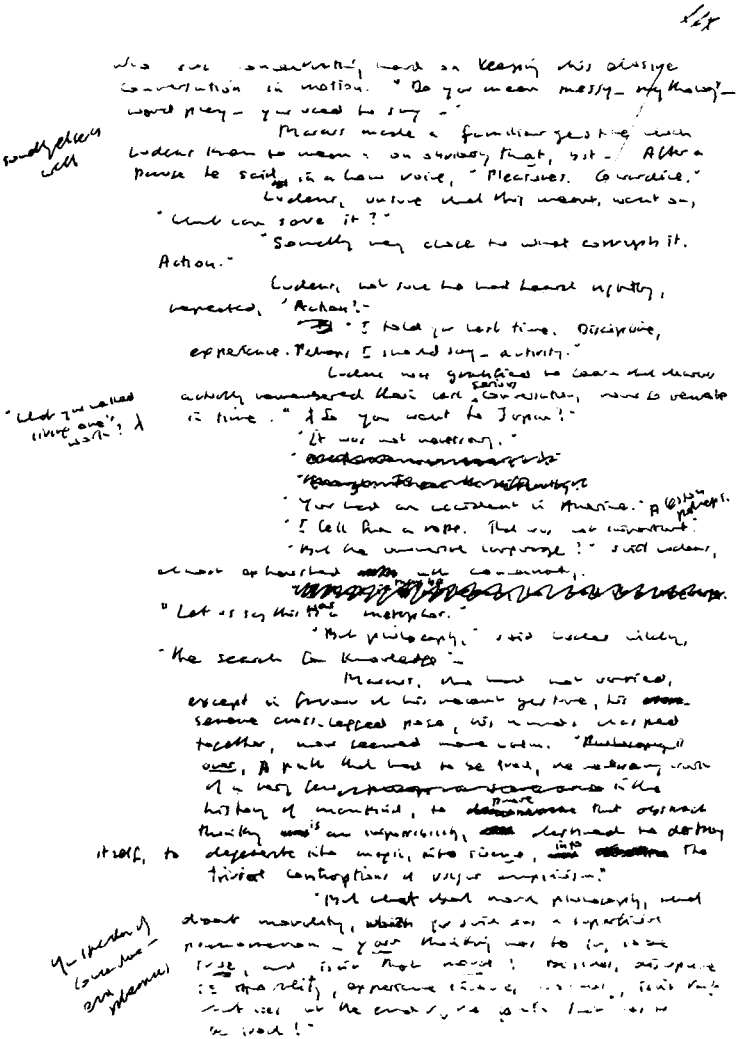
keeps pulling away from
them as if she were bored

with them three white
stones against the green

field one big one and
two small ones like those

stones in the Kyoto garden.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



A manuscript page from Iris Murdoch's most recent novel, The Message to the Planet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

© Tom Blau

The Art of Fiction CXVII
Iris Murdoch

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin on July 15, 1919 and grew up in London. She was educated at Badminton School in Bristol and studied Classics at Somerville College, Oxford, from 1938 until 1942, receiving first class honors. She was Assistant Principal in the Treasury from 1942 to 1944 and an Administrative Officer with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in England, Belgium and Austria during the years 1944 to 1946. She held a Sarah Smithson Studentship in philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1947–1948, and became a Fellow of St. Anne's College, Ox-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ford, and a university lecturer in philosophy the following year.

She published her first book, Sartre: Romantic Rationalist, *in 1953 and her first novel,* Under the Net, *the next year. Since then she has published twenty-four formal, traditional novels, including* The Sandcastle *(1957),* The Bell *(1958),* A Severed Head *(1961),* A Fairly Honourable Defeat *(1970),* A Word Child *(1975),* The Sea, The Sea *(1978), which won the Booker Prize for that year,* The Philosopher's Pupil *(1983),* The Good Apprentice *(1985),* The Book and the Brotherhood *(1987), and* The Message to the Planet *(1989).*

Murdoch married John Bayley, an Oxford don, in 1956, and for many years lived in Steeple Aston, a village near Oxfordshire. In 1963 she was named Honorary Fellow of St. Anne's College, and for the next four years was a part-time lecturer at the Royal College of Art in London. She moved from Steeple Aston to Oxford in 1986.

Though best known as a novelist, she has also published literary criticism, including the influential essay, "Against Dryness" (1961); a volume of poetry, A Year of Birds *(1978); three dramatic adaptations (two of which were collaborations) of her novels, as well as two original plays; and an additional three books of philosophy:* The Sovereignty of the Good *(1970),* The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists *(1977) and* Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues *(1986).*

Iris Murdoch has received many honors. In addition to the Booker Prize, she has won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for The Black Prince *and the Whitbread Literary Award for Fiction for* The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, *and is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She was named Companion of the British Empire in 1976 and Dame of the British Empire in 1987.*

Murdoch and her husband live in a house in academic north Oxford. In its comfortably untidy rooms books overflow the shelves and are piled high on the floor. Even the bathroom is filled with volumes on language, including Dutch and Esperanto grammar books. Her paper-strewn second-floor study is decorated with oriental rugs and with paintings of horses and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

children. The first-floor sitting room, which leads out to the garden, has a well-stocked bar. There are paintings and tapestries of flowers, art books and records, pottery and old bottles, and embroidered cushions on the deep sofa.

Additional questions were proposed to Murdoch by James Atlas in front of an audience at the YMHA in New York last spring.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you could say something about your family?

IRIS MURDOCH

My father went through the first war in the cavalry; it now seems extraordinary to think there was cavalry in World War I. This no doubt saved his life, because, of course, the horses were behind the lines, and in that sense he had a safer war. My parents met at that time. My father's regiment was based at the Curragh near Dublin and my father was on leave. On his way to church he met my mother, who was going to the same church on the same tram. She sang in the choir. My mother had a very beautiful soprano voice; she was training to be an opera singer and could have been very good indeed, but she gave up her ambitions when she married. She continued singing all her life in an amateur way, but she never realized the potential of that great voice. She was a beautiful, lively, witty woman, with a happy temperament. My parents were very happy together. They loved each other dearly; they loved me and I loved them, so it was a most felicitous trinity.

INTERVIEWER

When did you know you wanted to write?

MURDOCH

I knew very early on that I wanted to be a writer. I mean, when I was a child I knew that. Obviously, the war disturbed all one's feelings of the future very profoundly. When I finished my undergraduate career I was immediately conscripted because everyone was. Under ordinary circumstances, I would very much have wanted to stay on at Oxford, study

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for a Ph.D., and try to become a don. I was very anxious to go on learning. But one had to sacrifice one's wishes to the war. I went into the civil service, into the Treasury where I spent a couple of years. Then after the war I went into UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association, and worked with refugees in different parts of Europe.

INTERVIEWER

You were a member of the Communist Party, weren't you?

MURDOCH

I was a member of the Communist Party for a short time when I was a student, about 1939. I went in, as a lot of people did, out of a sense which arose during the Spanish Civil War that Europe was dangerously divided between left and right and we were jolly well going to be on the left. We had passionate feelings about social justice. We believed that socialism could, and fairly rapidly, produce just and good societies, without poverty and without strife. I lost those optimistic illusions fairly soon. So I left it. But it was just as well, in a way, to have seen the inside of Marxism because then one realizes how strong and how awful it is, certainly in its organized form. My association with it had its repercussions. Once I was offered a scholarship to come to Vassar. I was longing to go to America—such an adventure after being cooped up in England after the war. One did want to travel and see the world. I was prevented by the McCarren Act, and not given a visa. I may say there was a certain amount of to-do about this. Bertrand Russell got involved and Justice Felix Frankfurter, trying to say how ridiculous this was. But the McCarren Act is made of iron. It's still here; I have to ask for a waiver if I want to come to the United States.

INTERVIEWER

Even now?

MURDOCH

It's lunatic. One of the questions sometimes asked by some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

official is, "Can you prove that you are no longer a member of the Communist Party?"

INTERVIEWER

I should think that would be very difficult to do.

MURDOCH

Extremely! I left it about fifty years ago!

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell me a little bit about your own method of composition and how you go about writing a novel?

MURDOCH

Well, I think it is important to make a detailed plan before you write the first sentence. Some people think one should write—"George woke up and knew that something terrible had happened yesterday"—and then see what happens. I plan the whole thing in detail before I begin. I have a general scheme and lots of notes. Every chapter is planned. Every conversation is planned. This is, of course, a primary stage, and very frightening because you've committed yourself at this point. I mean, a novel is a long job, and if you get it wrong at the start you're going to be very unhappy later on. The second stage is that one should sit quietly and let the thing invent itself. One piece of imagination leads to another. You think about a certain situation and then some quite extraordinary aspect of it suddenly appears. The deep things that the work is about declare themselves and connect. Somehow things fly together and generate other things, and characters invent other characters, as if they were all doing it themselves. One should be patient and extend this period as far as possible. Of course, actually writing it involves a different kind of imagination and work.

INTERVIEWER

You are remarkably prolific as a novelist. You seem to enjoy writing a great deal.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MURDOCH

Yes, I do enjoy it, but it has, of course—I mean, this is true of any art form—moments when you think it's awful, you lose confidence and it's all black. You can't think and so on. So, it's not all enjoyment. But I don't actually find writing in itself difficult. The *creation* of the story is the agonizing part. You have the extraordinary experience when you begin a novel that you are now in a state of unlimited freedom, and this is alarming. Every choice you make will exclude another choice, so that it's rather important what happens then, what state of mind you're in and what you think matters. Books should have themes. I choose titles carefully and the titles in some way indicate something deep in the theme of the book. Names are important. The names sometimes don't come at once, but the physical being and the mind of the character have to come pretty early on and you just have to wait for the gods to offer you something. You have to spend a lot of time looking out of the window and writing down scrappy notes which may or may not help. You have to wait patiently until you feel that you're getting the thing right—who the people are, what it's all about, how it moves. I may take a long time, say a year, just sitting and fishing around, putting the thing into some sort of shape. Then I do a very detailed synopsis of every chapter, every conversation, everything that happens. That would be another operation.

INTERVIEWER

Which tends to come first—characters or plot?

MURDOCH

I think they all start in much the same way, with two or three people in a relationship with a problem. Then there is a story, ordeals, conflicts, a movement from illusion to reality, all that. I don't think I have any autobiographical tendencies and can't think of any novel I've written that is a copy of my own life.

INTERVIEWER

And you write by hand?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MURDOCH

Oh, yes, yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER

No machines, no computers?

MURDOCH

No.

INTERVIEWER

And then take them up to your publisher who's terrified because there's only one copy?

MURDOCH

Yes, at the end there's only one copy. I know that some people like word processors, but I do a great degree of correcting as I go along. I think if one had that green screen in front of one, one would be so fascinated by the words on it one wouldn't want to change any of them!

INTERVIEWER

What are your daily work habits?

MURDOCH

I like working and when I have time to work, I work. But I also have to do other things like washing up and buying food. Fortunately my husband does the cooking. I sometimes have to go to London or I want to see my friends. Otherwise, I work pretty steadily all the time. I go to bed early and I start work very early. I work all morning, and then I shop and write letters—the letters take up a lot of time—in the afternoon. Then I work again from about half-past four until seven or eight. So I work steadily when I've got the open time, which is more days than not.

INTERVIEWER

How many words a day do you usually write?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MURDOCH

I've never thought of counting words. I'd rather not know.

INTERVIEWER

A moment ago you mentioned the names of your characters. How do you choose them?

MURDOCH

They have to choose themselves; one just waits. If you make a mistake there, this can be quite a serious matter. The character has to announce his own name. I make lists of names; I often invent names. I once invented the name Gavender; I thought, "Nobody's named Gavender." Then I got a letter from someone in America saying, "How did you know about our family?" It is fun inventing names. Names are very important because a lot of atmosphere comes with a name. The way a person is going to be addressed by his fellow characters is important, too.

INTERVIEWER

How do you find specific details about experts, like Bruno and his spiders, in your novels?

MURDOCH

I'm very interested in spiders. I like spiders. Spiders are my friends, and I have read books about spiders. So that part of the book was just part of a spider lore which I happen to possess.

INTERVIEWER

But if a man has a job like a wine merchant or soldier?

MURDOCH

I ask my wine merchant friends to help me. As for soldiers, my brother-in-law is a soldier. Everything to do with guns my husband, John, supplies because he is very interested in weapons. He knows all about weapons from the early Greeks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up to the latest machine guns. One's friends can help. And of course there are books.

INTERVIEWER

What's your most difficult technical problem?

MURDOCH

It's the one I mentioned earlier, the beginning, how to start and when to begin structuring the novel. It is this progression from complete freedom to a narrow cage, how fast you move and when you decide what the main things in the book are going to be. I think these are the most difficult things. One must consider what one's characters are like, what jobs they do, what religion they have, what nationality they are, how they are related to each other, and so on. Here at the beginning one has infinite possibilities, this choice of what sort of people they are and what sort of troubles they are going to have, who wins, who loses, who dies. Most of all one must reflect upon their values, their morality, their moral dilemmas. You can't write any novel without implying values. You can't write a traditional novel without giving your characters moral problems and judgments. That is what is most difficult of all.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that "one constantly takes prototypes from literature who may actually influence one's conduct." Could you give specific examples?

MURDOCH

Did I say that? Good heavens, I can't remember the context. Of course, one feels affection for, or identifies with, certain fictional characters. My two favorites are Achilles and Mr. Knightley. This shows the difficulty of thinking of characters who might influence one. I could reflect upon characters in Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy; these writers particularly come to mind: wise moralistic writers who portray the complexity of morality and the difficulty of being good.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Plato remarks in *The Republic* that bad characters are volatile and interesting, whereas good characters are dull and always the same. This certainly indicates a literary problem. It is difficult in life to be good, and difficult in art to portray goodness. Perhaps we don't know much about goodness. Attractive bad characters in fiction may corrupt people, who think, "So that's okay." Inspiration from good characters may be rarer and harder, yet Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* and the grandmother in Proust's novel exist. I think one is influenced by the whole moral atmosphere of literary works, just as we are influenced by Shakespeare, a great exemplar for the novelist. In the most effortless manner he portrays moral dilemmas, good and evil, and the differences and the struggle between them. I think he is a deeply religious writer. He doesn't portray religion directly in the plays, but it is certainly there, a sense of the spiritual, of goodness, of self-sacrifice, of reconciliation and of forgiveness. I think that is the absolutely prime example of how we ought to tell a story: invent characters and convey something dramatic which at the same time has deep spiritual significance.

INTERVIEWER

If your fictional characters are not based on real people, as they are for most novelists, for example Hemingway and Lawrence, then how are your characters created?

MURDOCH

Just by this process of sitting and waiting. I would abominate the idea of putting real people into a novel, not only because I think it's morally questionable, but also because I think it would be terribly dull. I don't want to make a photographic copy of somebody I know. I want to create somebody who never existed, and who is at the same time a plausible person. I think the characteristics gradually gather together. The first image of the character may be very shadowy; one vaguely knows that he is a good citizen or a religious sort of chap. Perhaps he's puritanical, or hedonistic, and so on. I must have some notion of the troubles he's going to be in and his rela-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tionship to the other characters. But the details on which the novel depends, the details of his appearance, his peculiarities, his idiosyncrasies, his other characteristics, his mode of being, will come later—if one is lucky—and quite instinctively, because the more you see of a person the more a kind of coherence begins to evolve.

INTERVIEWER

Your characters are not necessarily innocents. They're able to commit violence and all sorts of misdeeds, and yet there exists this imperative within them toward the good. Does philosophy apply here?

MURDOCH

I don't think this connects with philosophy. The consideration of moral issues in the novels may be intensified by some philosophical considerations, but on the whole I think it's dangerous writing a philosophical novel. I mean, this is not a thing writers can easily get away with. Take the case of Thomas Mann, whom I adore, for instance. When his characters start having very long philosophical conversations, one feels, "Well, perhaps we could do without this." My novels are not "philosophical novels."

INTERVIEWER

Well, your characters also have long philosophical arguments.

MURDOCH

Well, occasionally, but not very long.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote, "A great artist is, in respect of his work, a good man and in the true sense a free man." I wonder if you could interpret that?

MURDOCH

The important phrase is, ". . . in respect to his work," be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cause obviously great artists can lead less than perfect lives. Take Dante for instance. Or Shakespeare. We know very little about Shakespeare's life. You could name almost anybody who has written a great or good novel and see that their lives are imperfect. You can be unselfish and truthful in your art, and a monster at home. To write a good book you have to have certain qualities. Great art is connected with courage and truthfulness. There is a conception of truth, a lack of illusion, an ability to overcome selfish obsessions, which goes with good art, and the artist has got to have that particular sort of moral stamina. Good art, whatever its style, has qualities of hardness, firmness, realism, clarity, detachment, justice, truth. It is the work of a free, unfettered, uncorrupted imagination. Whereas bad art is the soft, messy self-indulgent work of an enslaved fantasy. Pornography is at one end of that scale, great art at the other end.

The reading of great books, the contemplation of great art, is somehow very good for one. There's a truthfulness of great art which one sees in the great nineteenth-century novels. It is very difficult to attain, to create something which is not a fantasy. I'd want to make a distinction between fantasy and imagination, not the same as Coleridge's, but a distinction between the expression of immediate selfish feelings and the elimination of yourself in a work of art. The most obvious case of the former would be the novel where the writer is the hero and is always succeeding. He doesn't succeed at first, but he's very brave, and all the girls like him, and so on. That tends to spoil the work. I think some of D. H. Lawrence's work is spoiled by too much Lawrence. What is important is an ability to have an image of perfection and to expel fantasy and the sort of lesser, egoistic cravings and the kind of imagery and immediate expressions that might go with them, and to be prepared to think and to wait. It's difficult, as I say, to make this into any sort of program, to overcome egoism and fantasy.

INTERVIEWER

What would be an example in the novel?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MURDOCH

There would be very obvious cases—the whole tradition of the English novel from Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë, George Eliot and, of course, Henry James, whom I love. I also love the Russian novel. In a curious way English-speaking people feel a great affinity with the Russians. Somehow, the works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in translation seem very natural to us. It's as if they were already writing in English. I think that we have the same feeling about Proust—that he's really an English writer! He speaks to us very directly . . . whereas Stendhal and Flaubert are more remote. We know they're French. It was the great age of the novel. One can always return to them and find marvelous wisdom.

INTERVIEWER

Should the novelist also be a moralist and teacher?

MURDOCH

Moralist, yes. Teacher suggests something rather more didactic in tone. A novelist is bound to express values, and I think he should be conscious of the fact that he is, in a sense, a compulsory moralist. Novelists differ, of course, in the extent to which they set out to reflect on morals and to put that reflection into their work. I certainly do reflect and put this reflection into my works, whether or not with success. The question is how to do it. If you can't do it well, you had better not do it at all. If you have strong moral feelings, you may be in difficulties with your characters because you may want them to be less emphatic than you are yourself. In answer to your question, I think a novelist should be wary of being a teacher in a didactic sense, but should be conscious of himself as a moralist.

INTERVIEWER

In your work you consider what religion means for people who do not believe in God. Can you say something about this?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MURDOCH

This question interests and concerns me very much. Looking at western societies I think that if we have religion, we shall have to have religion without God, because belief in a personal God is becoming increasingly impossible for many people. It's a difficult question actually to know what believing in a personal God is. I know that I don't believe in one. I don't want to use the word "God" in any other sense. I think it's a proper name. I don't believe in the divinity of Christ. I don't believe in life after death. My beliefs really are Buddhist in style. I've been very attached to Buddhism. Buddhism makes it plain that you can have religion without God, that religion is in fact better off without God. It has to do with *now*, with every moment of one's life, how one thinks, what one is and does, about love and compassion and the overcoming of self, the difference between illusion and reality.

INTERVIEWER

In your book on Jean-Paul Sartre, you write of a kind of breakdown of moral authority, the disappearance of religion and a sense of chaos that's ushered in and reflects itself in your work.

MURDOCH

Well, it's a long way back to the Sartre era. His popularity immediately after the war was extraordinary. People who had nothing to do with philosophy felt that a philosophy had been invented for them. The war had been so terrible and so destructive, and the Hitler era had been so unimaginably awful. People wanted to find a way of having some kind of spirit come back into their life. Sartre's existentialist ethic with its notion of complete freedom, and the notion that you should get yourself into a state where you can make a choice which transcends conventions and the dull feeling of being contained, submerged, and so on—this (and his novels, too) reflects a, in a way, heroic ethic. It did cheer people up a lot. I don't particularly go along with this myself, but it had a great revivifying effect.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

I wondered how you feel about your own achievements and what you've done?

MURDOCH

Well, one is always discontented with what one has done. And also, of course, one's always afraid that even the things one has done can't be done again. I don't know. I think artists live in the present, really. I mean, forget about the past and what you've done because it's what you think you can do *next* which matters. For any writer it's terribly discouraging if somebody says, "Oh, I loved your first novel!" My heart sinks when they say that, because that suggests it's been downhill all the way!

INTERVIEWER

What were you able to accomplish in the play, *The Black Prince*, that you did not accomplish in the novel?

MURDOCH

Well, the theater is such a different game. Writers of fiction, of novels, are pleased when they can see something of their work on the stage and hear people uttering their lines and so on. But a play is made of lines, and it's got to be . . . I mean, the miracle about the theater is why people stay there. Why don't they get up and go? It's not at all easy to write a play. There's a special kind of magic involved. My first adventure in the theater was a very pleasant one because I worked with J. B. Priestley on making a play out of a novel of mine called *A Severed Head*. He said to me, "Duckie, this is a difficult game; a very few people can succeed at it. If it was all that easy everybody would be doing it." It is very difficult to compress the reflections of one's characters and the great pattern of a novel into drama where it is a matter of lines and short speeches and actual actors and so on. The forms are so different that they can't possibly be compared. A play is much more like a poem.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something about your use of painters and painting in fiction? I'm thinking of Max Beckmann in *Henry and Cato*, Bronzino in *The Nice and the Good,* Titian in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine.*

MURDOCH

I am very interested in painting. Painting appears more frequently than music, for instance, because I know far more about painting than about music. The only music which tends to appear is singing, which I know about because of my mother. I love painting. I love looking at pictures, and I did once very much want to be a painter. I understand painting in a way I don't understand music, though I am moved by music. I know a lot of painters. I know what painting is. I enjoy bringing in painting. I loved doing the Beckmann business in *Henry and Cato.* I admire Beckmann very much and I've seen a lot of Beckmanns in St. Louis and other places. With a bit of luck, one's own interests and feelings can run straight along with those of the character. But there is also the challenge of inventing characters with alien interests. This can be a dangerous business.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see a painting you are particularly interested in and think, "I might be able to use that some day in a novel," or "I'd like to use it because it attracts and interests me"?

MURDOCH

The novel often indicates a painting during the process of creating the characters. Somehow the character will lead to the painting. A great painting which I have only recently seen—it lives in Czechoslovakia—is Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*—He was over ninety when he painted it. This painting gives me very much, though I have only referred to it indirectly.

INTERVIEWER

Does your husband read and comment on your works before they're published?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MURDOCH

No, he doesn't see them until they're printed. I talk to him occasionally about things where he can help me, about how a revolver works or something like that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you show parts of the novel to your editor at Chatto & Windus before it's completed?

MURDOCH

No, I don't show it to them until I've finished it. I don't ask for advice.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think children limit the freedom needed as a writer?

MURDOCH

Oh, no. There are innumerable examples of their compatibility. Women have obvious problems about family life and doing jobs. But, in a way, being a writer is one of the easier choices because you can do it at home. I don't think there is an awful problem there.

INTERVIEWER

Which contemporary writers do you respect?

MURDOCH

I don't really read contemporary writers very much. For instance, I enjoyed reading Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*, and A.S. Byatt's wonderful novel, *Possession*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read the works of writers you know?

MURDOCH

Yes, sometimes. But I don't read much contemporary fiction. I particularly admire John Cowper Powys. I particularly like *Wolf Solent, A Glastonbury Romance* and *Weymouth*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sands. They are very long novels, full of details which novels should have. I think he is very good on sex. Sex is a complicated, subtle, omnipresent, mysterious, multifarious business; sex is everywhere. I think Hardy is a far more erotic writer than Lawrence. John Cowper Powys is really interested in sex, just as keen on it as Lawrence, but he understands and portrays it far better. He sees so many different aspects of it. He treats it with reverence and respect. He finds it very strange, and funny, and mysterious.

INTERVIEWER

What effect would you like your books to have?

MURDOCH

I'd like people to enjoy reading them. A readable novel is a gift to humanity. It provides an innocent occupation. Any novel takes people away from their troubles and the television set; it may even stir them to reflect about human life, characters, morals. So I would like people to be able to read the stuff. I'd like it to be understood too; though some of the novels are not all that easy, I'd like them to be understood, and not grossly misunderstood. But literature is to be enjoyed, to be grasped by enjoyment.

INTERVIEWER

How would you describe your ideal reader?

MURDOCH

Those who like a jolly good yarn are welcome and worthy readers. I suppose the *ideal* reader is someone who likes a jolly good yarn and enjoys thinking about the book as well, thinking about the moral issues.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think a good yarn is essential to the novel?

MURDOCH

It is one of the main charms of the art form and its prime

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mode of exposition. A novel without a story must work very hard in other ways to be worth reading, and indeed to be read. Some of today's anti-story novels are too deliberately arcane. I think story is essential to the survival of the novel. A novel may be "difficult" but its story can carry and retain the reader who may understand in his own way, even remember and return. Stories are a fundamental human form of thought.

—**Jeffrey Meyers**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Channel Crossings

Emmanuel Carrère

He doesn't know how to swim; he's more like an elf than a water sprite. And still, he loves the water. Ever since Lord Byron and he rented the boat, they've gone out on the lake almost every afternoon, braving the storms. In the past few weeks the rain generally begins fairly late. During the day the sky darkens with clouds, which get thicker and thicker, and the storm breaks in the late afternoon. Every evening the two navigators return soaked to the skin, enchanted by the risks they have taken, singing refrains with incomprehensible words at the top of their lungs, which Byron claims are Albanian songs. Albania, where he had traveled in the past, and where the pasha of Janina complimented him on his hands and ears—the most delicate he'd ever seen—often comes up in his conversation. He praises the climate, the gentle ways and liberal morals of its inhabitants (to shock Claire, he boasts of having seduced children who hadn't even reached puberty), he flaunts the rank of colonel given to him by the Albanian army, and describes his grand uniform. It's precisely for this reason that Percy and Mary nicknamed him Albé, L.B., also standing for his initials.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A water sprite incapable of swimming, she repeats to herself. And she? She knows how to swim; she had learned quite young. It had been one of her father's many educational principles that Percy now teases her about, having once made such a fuss over them—but in his own way, with none of Albé's cynicism. If one thinks about Percy's person, it is even strange to try and comprehend his total absence of spitefulness. It is as though he lacked one of his senses: he knows no more how to be malicious than how to swim, and couldn't master the necessary technique, even if his life depended on it. He is able to hurt people, all the same.

So Mary knows how to swim, but isn't terribly fond of the water. She's afraid of it, more for Percy than for herself. Every day at the same time—at precisely this hour—she imagines him drowning, getting thrown overboard, carried off by a wave and passively allowing himself to sink without a struggle. These fears amuse Percy. Come to think of it, she wonders whether this isn't in fact a form of spitefulness—the only one accessible to him—jesting about it that way. He even enjoys frightening her. Percy, who can't bear to hurt people, loves to scare them. He knows that she's afraid of the water, and whenever he teases her, will ask if she had also been afraid in Dover.

It's always Dover, always that memory. It had happened two years ago, only a few days after he had stolen her away from the home of old Godwin. It was the first time they had left England together (and already, Claire was along with them). Days of riding in the coach, bags that barely closed, flea-ridden country inns, days of wild happiness. In Dover, they had waited for the boat to Calais. It was summer—an English summer—which tonight, all of a sudden, is something she misses. The beach was only a narrow strip of pebbles. They gained access to it by climbing over a freshly painted white fence that had stained Mary's dress. She took it off and rinsed it in the sea to get rid of the two large white stripes; then at Percy's request, who was grinning like a child, she got completely undressed and went in for a swim. Now, stretched on the chaise longue, her writing desk open before her, she dis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tinctly remembers the exquisite, cold sensation of entering the water. The feeling of the stones beneath her feet, their sharp edges, how she had shivered when she had gone in up to the waist, and what her genitalia had looked like. Her patchy blond fleece inflated like a sponge, as if it were no longer a part of her. Then she had moved in as far as her breasts and armpits. Her loose hair floated around her shoulders; she hadn't cared about getting it wet. Once in the water, she glanced back at Percy, who had also undressed, and was plowing through the little waves to join her. Since he was taller than she, he could still touch bottom where she was swimming, and they made love. He had been carrying her, standing with his feet planted as firmly as possible in the sand that was slipping between his toes and under his heels, and that had slid out from under him so quickly that they were suddenly in the open sea, without realizing it. It was only once she opened her eyes after the orgasm that she was able to gauge the distance they had covered, and then realized that Percy could no longer touch bottom, that his sole anchor was not the ground, but inside of her. And now that he had emptied himself—a hot stream had erupted in her belly and the whitish threads, fine and sticky like gossamer, had merged with the foam all around them—now that Percy was about to withdraw his member from her, nothing else was holding him up. He would sink and drown. Apparently he still hadn't realized it himself, or else he hadn't been disturbed by the prospect. She feared that she wasn't strong enough to bring him back to shore, and above all, that he would panic, like anyone who doesn't know how to swim, vainly splashing about, hanging on to her and hindering her movement. In a case like that, she had been told that the only solution was to knock the struggling swimmer unconscious, or plunge his head underwater. It is easier to haul in an unconscious body than a floundering monster whose uncoordinated gestures interfere with the rescue. For a moment she had pictured herself hitting Percy with all her might, while he was still unaware of the danger, smiling dreamily with half-closed eyes. She had imagined the look he would give her, and the crazy idea that might pass through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his head before he swallowed a mouthful of water. Mary, with whom he had just made love, wanted to kill him; she had always wanted to kill him; she had followed him and pretended to love him merely to arrive at this point, so that she could murder him with impunity at the moment he least expected it—assuming that a moment could ever exist in which he might have expected it more. Horrified that a thought such as this, dictated by an obvious misinterpretation, could possibly arise in Percy's mind, even fleetingly, she had suddenly felt drained of all her strength. She closed her eyes. A violent pain throbbed at her temples; she had felt a dizziness behind her forehead and over her brow, burning into her brain; her ears pulsated with blood. Then she heard a long scream, a strange, sustained note coming out of her mouth. And at the same time—since she could hear it—she reentered the world of sound, obliterated a moment earlier. Behind the sound of her scream, was the distinct and gentle lapping of waves on the pebbles, and the waves breaking against her bare flanks, the moving pebbles digging into her back. The cries of sea gulls. She had opened her eyes onto the circle of sun, as close to her as the eye of another person. Then she had closed them, reopened them—she was on the beach. Percy, leaning over her, was massaging her shoulders and looking at her as if he didn't know what to do, as if astonished by the situation and reduced to this useless and awkward gesture. She had fainted in the water, in his arms, he told her later. Out of pleasure, he thought, and she hadn't corrected him. Besides, perhaps he was right, perhaps it had all gone through her mind at the moment of orgasm.

"But how did you bring me back to the beach?"

"I carried you. It wasn't easy. You were shaking so and clinging to my shoulders. I could barely keep my head above water."

"So you swam?"

"I don't know. Yes, I suppose I did."

Had he really swum? For a moment it was no longer Percy, but someone else, a stranger, holding her. At any rate, he had never swum again. He doesn't know how, he never has. But whenever Mary gets worried about him, he brings up Dover,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

changing the story slightly each time. Should she tell Emily about Dover? Mary wonders. But how?

She heaves a discouraged sigh, and then, as if this sigh needed a motive, something to justify it, she returns to the letter she has just begun.

My dear Emily,

As I have a million things to tell you, and don't know how to begin my letter, I shall apologize for not having written sooner—it's been almost two years. I could make pages of excuses, but that would only keep me from getting on with my story. Besides, I have had this plan in mind for several days now. Tonight, as every night, I settle down in front of the darling little desk that Percy brought back from the village so that I can work comfortably on the terrace (but you hardly know who Percy is, or to which terrace I am referring), take out a piece of blank paper, and hesitate. Will this page be the first of a letter that I owe you or the first of the second chapter of my novel? I can already picture you shaking your head: little Mary, writing a novel! Don't worry, it isn't very far along, but I think about it constantly. I know the characters, the plot, I have drawn up the outline—all I have to do now is to work on it.

As for the letter, well, that's another story. In all truthfulness, if I were able to write you the letter you deserve, the novel would almost be finished by that time. My dear, you must think that all the traveling and the poetry have gone to my head, and you certainly wouldn't be mistaken there. Tonight, in any case, I have made a heroic decision: I am putting the novel aside, and now I am already on the second page of my letter to you.

We have been here for almost a month, in a villa called Montalègre. It's on the shore of Lake Geneva, and you can't imagine the exquisite sight stretching before my eyes, to the point where I'm tempted to put down my letter and watch the sun sink into the sky and disappear . . .

Mary finishes rereading the first page. She makes a face and tears it up. Then she picks up the second one.

. . . behind the golden hills. Since I have given in to that temptation for three days in a row, I swore to myself today that I would stand firm, and that even when it becomes too dark to write, I shall ask for a candle. It does attract mosquitoes, but out of love for you, I am prepared to be covered with little red

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spots that make Percy cry out as if it were his own skin being mercilessly bitten, and on which he would then be forced to apply vinegar. Every evening he takes care of me as seriously as if he were saying Mass, and for nothing in the world would he allow our physician, Doctor Polidori, (I say "our physician," but he isn't really ours, even if he would like to be mine) to carry out his dedicated task. When he kisses me, he grimaces, his mouth full of vinegar. And he kisses me a great deal.

How difficult it is for me, my dear, to picture you in London, in a corner by the fireside, perhaps, or at the window, busy reading this letter, which is taking forever to get going! I am certain that you are getting impatient: you are crumpling the thick wad of paper, searching through the pages to see what extraordinary news I have to tell and that I have put off revealing. You skip over all the pages that follow, I continue to talk about mosquitoes, the view from our terrace, the marvelous weather we are having, and all that nonsense. Very well, then. No, you shall not have to skip over them, because there won't be anything to skip. Now I shall truly begin, I give you fair warning.

The second page ends there, and Mary tears it up as well. Then she gazes at the little pieces of paper scattered around the chaise longue. A gust of wind slowly pushes a few pieces to the edge of the terrace, and they disappear into the invisible orchard, swamped in blackish rain. One can hardly see a thing, even on the terrace, and even if Mary had wanted to, she couldn't have gone back to her writing without candlelight.

It is almost night. Percy and Albé should have been back by now. Perhaps they have gone directly to Diodati, she thinks bitterly, without bothering to come and fetch her. A bolt of lightning splits the sky in two, followed by a rumble of thunder in the mountains, the rustling of leaves in the wind. Silence. Then the sound of a child crying from inside the house. William must have woken up. He's hungry. The pattering of footsteps in the hall behind her. Claire will take care of it, which is fine with her. What does it matter if she thinks that Mary is a bad mother, or if she lets it be known with that mournful, dignified air of hers? Mary doesn't feel like seeing her son right now, nor does she feel like seeing Claire. In fact, she doesn't feel like doing much of anything.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Earlier on in the afternoon, when she had gone to sit on the terrace after Percy had left, she really wanted to write to Emily. And now that the enterprise appears to be doomed to another failure, it seems even more imperative than when she had written those first banal words; if they rang false, it was more out of habit than conviction. Yet she owes nothing to this friend from childhood. And if she really wanted to carry on a regular correspondence, it would be more logical to send it to her father, for instance, or to one of her sisters. Mary hadn't written to them for almost a year; she wouldn't know how to go about it now. If Emily is the only one to enjoy this privilege (at this rate, she'll never get a letter), and if from Mary's point of view, she represents the ideal correspondent, it isn't owing to any particular affinity for this somewhat ordinary girl—it is more for everything that now divides them and permits Mary to measure the distance she has covered since her flight.

Emily is a year older than Mary. When they were children, Mary had been struck by her self-assurance and offhand manner. She was the kind of exhilarating family companion who never stopped playing practical jokes, who would burst out laughing, and talk back to adults with such gay insolence that no one knew how to control her. In comparison, Mary had seemed shy, almost retiring. At age fifteen she had honestly thought that Emily was destined to a romantic fate, while she herself would marry some nice but slightly dull young man. Besides which, Emily had always encouraged their belief in this assignation of roles. However, it was Mary and not Emily who had eloped one spring evening with a young poet, more handsome than all the heroes in the novels they had read; she was the one who, without getting married, was leading a nomadic life of makeshift homes, traveling through Europe, spending her evenings in the company of the celebrated and scandalous Lord Byron—to whom Emily, two years ago, had referred as a kind of seductive scoundrel, proud that a friend of her mother's had met him while at the home of Lady Caroline Lamb, then his mistress. Since she had left, Mary had had time to realize that Emily's insolence and eccentricities were the kind of thing that families tolerated and even appreciated,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because they know that it will never go beyond a certain point; that it's the guarantee of a peaceful life, graced with a touch of imagination that satisfies everyone and worries no one. In those few days Mary and Emily hadn't actually traded roles; it was just that Mary's departure had shattered the reassuring image that had given these roles their meaning. Emily had remained the life of the party, and Mary had said good-bye to that life and to parties, and without losing her serious, meditative, and sometimes ferocious temperament, had forever abandoned the world in which Emily had been left behind. Emily embodies that world gone by, and now that the difference in character of the two girls has been rendered meaningless by time, Mary feels that by writing to Emily, she is addressing herself to a former Mary, painting a portrait, or trying to, of what she has become, but still doesn't comprehend.

To make herself understood by this former Mary, whose part is conveniently played by Emily, she will have to start at the beginning and tell her everything that has happened. And it's hard to tell everything. Of course, she can enumerate certain events, retrace the different stages of their travels, mention their crossing to France, their arrival in Switzerland, talk about Claire, tell her that William was born—Emily doesn't even know that she has a child. But she would also have to talk about Percy (Percy is a person, and then what? He doesn't know how to swim, but what about Dover?), and the nights they had spent under the stars or in abandoned castles in Cévennes, reciting poems and telling each other stories; Percy's outings in the boat when night falls and how worried she gets; how much she loves Percy and how frightened he makes her, how horribly frightened. She would also have to talk about Lord Byron, of the opulence that surrounds him and the almost evil way that this opulence, this aura, affects everyone around him, Percy and herself included. In short, she would have to put down on paper the thoughts, sensations, and feelings of two years of her life, everything that made it so that in the past few years, Mary Godwin has been Mary Godwin and not Emily Meadows. This abundance of detail

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

renders the letter as difficult, for the same reasons, as the famous novel she claims to be writing. There, for once she has spoken the truth: if she were able to draft the letter, set down all that she wished to explain, it would no longer be worth slaving away on the novel. All things considered, however, it must be easier to relate the life of an imaginary person than it is to tell one's own story. The other day, when she had begun writing the first lines, "I am by birth a Genevese," she felt invested with a power that deserted her as soon as she tried to set down, in a necessarily jumbled order, her memories of the past two years. The hero of a novel, she thinks, deserves a simplified, exotic biography, one that can be summed up in a series of striking events. She doesn't need to talk about the warmth of the sun on his skin one summer afternoon, or the precise taste of his beloved's lips, or what happened at Dover. It's true that this novel is something to take her mind off more disturbing things, and this wager represents an easy way out of her dilemma. Still, it's not that easy, and as usual, she has lied on this score: she'll never send the letter, she isn't even certain anymore that Emily exists, and yet she's lying to her. Naturally, she doesn't know a thing about either the plot or the general outline! Like the letter, the novel grinds to a halt whenever she must come to the heart of the matter (in other words, find out precisely what the matter *is*), stop being evasive, stop blackening pages (a good fifteen already) with tiny falsehoods, whether it's a question of dainty inlaid writing desks or radiant sunshine or the youth of this hero who is "by birth a Genevese," about whom she knows only (since yesterday) that his name is Victor Frankenstein and that he resembles (depending on her mood) Percy, Albé, even Polidori—all the men around her.

So far, the only thing she has come up with is a clever way to stretch out the introduction, to preserve the intoxication of that first day, when she discovered the freedom of breathing life into a paper hero. After all, a hero (even an imaginary one) who announces that he is "by birth a Genevese" is obliged to make this announcement somewhere; he isn't writing in a void, but in a precise place and moment in his life. And so,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to play for time, Mary concentrates on this place and this moment. At the moment, Mary is quite close to giving up; she cannot understand why she's at a standstill, why it's so hard for her to invent a story. Perhaps because Percy is constantly encouraging her to write, and she's afraid of disappointing him, just as she's afraid of revealing her true thoughts to him in their joint diary.

Strictly speaking, Mary is not much given to keeping a private diary. She prefers to write letters: to herself, to correspondents who are wholly imaginary or as abstract as Emily. Still, ever since she began living with Shelley, they've each kept a record of their thoughts in the same notebook, thoughts that are mostly about their life together. At first she found this practice delightful. Both of them strove to be honest, precise, scrupulous, and they believed this daily effort made each of them transparent in the other's eyes. Whenever one—or both—of them would feel a certain strain, whenever some misunderstanding, a gesture or an awkward silence, would threaten to put the slightest distance between them, they knew they could clear it up by reading each other's version of things that very evening, and they had such confidence in their sincerity, as well as in their powers of expression, that they felt these shared confessions banished every obstacle. Shelley dreams of a society in which politics will be conducted by these means, through notebooks in which every citizen might, with perfect freedom, set down his wishes or air his grievances. Extraordinarily enough, their confidence in each other was well founded, at first, for at that time nothing serious had ever come between them. In the first flush of love, in that life of shared exaltation, they could believe themselves to be a single being without fear of any contradiction—save in minute differences of opinion on this or that subject, which they hastened to commit to paper, marveling all the while at how speedily these differences were resolved. From time to time Mary leafs through their notebooks from the year before, in which her elegant and orderly writing alternates with Shelley's more exuberant and capricious hand. Never, she thinks, had she been so happy, nor would she ever be again. Their argu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ments, which never lasted long, were usually over Claire, her half sister, whom she had believed at first to be in love with Shelley. As it turned out, however, Claire had set her sights on Lord Byron. Taking advantage of his distress over his divorce and the confusion surrounding his imminent departure for the Continent, she had forced herself upon him. Bluntly put, she had offered herself: the poet had not refused her advances, but had quickly grown tired of this unhappy, jealous woman. Mary and Percy had had to console the abandoned Claire, then advise her on her plans of reconquest, which they viewed with indulgent skepticism. All the same, they had invited her along with them on their travels, hoping she would forget this necessarily short-lived liaison. Claire's presence is burdensome to Mary, but Shelley, always the gentleman, will not hear of sending her back to England.

And so, smuggled in by Claire, Byron had invaded their diary like an enemy spy, in Mary's opinion. Percy had mentioned his name once or twice in earlier entries, but these had been enthusiastic literary observations, and there had been no way of knowing that in three months' time they would encounter the notorious poet himself, purely by chance.

Mary remembers their first meeting perfectly. It was at the end of May, before they had rented Montalègre, when they were staying at the Hotel d'Angleterre in Sécheron, a large town near Geneva. Each morning they would go for a walk in the countryside, and sometimes they would take a rowboat out on the lake; then the sky would become overcast—with the arrival of volcanic ash from Java—and they would return to the hotel. Shelley had just begun work on a new poem, which always made him quite cheerful. Mary was reading Gibbon, taking care of little William, and faithfully filling up the diary that bore witness to their happiness. She was also building a collection of dried plants for botanical study. As for Claire, she preferred to stay by herself, and often sulked in her room. One day, as they returned hand in hand from their walk, Percy and Mary found the hotel in as much of an uproar as if hordes of barbarians had pitched camp there. The couple stood open-mouthed on the threshold, loath to make their way through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a maze of trunks so gigantic they reminded the Shelleys of those instruments of torture called iron maidens, which they had seen in Lyon. Some of them were already open, as though their owner had intended not only to occupy all the rooms in the hotel with his retinue, but to take over the lobby as well. Luxurious fabrics, silks, velvets spilled out upon the carpet, while a turbaned black man unpacked an assortment of silver articles—plates, dishes, drinking cups—which he placed carefully on the steps leading to the Shelleys' room, pausing occasionally to buff a piece on his sleeve. When two loud grunts behind them informed Percy and Mary that they were in the way, they stepped aside, each pressing back against one of the columns flanking the door, through which passed two men carrying an enormous rectangular frame draped with a black cloth. The porters took a few steps, then turned to face the front door, and with a well-timed movement, let the black cloth slip off like the curtain in a theater, thus revealing the object to be a mirror with a delicately engraved frame. Unfortunately, there was no time to admire it. Turned toward the door, the unveiled mirror at first reflected Percy and Mary, who were still standing at the entrance like sentinels, petrified with astonishment; then, in the background, they saw the hotel garden drenched in sunshine (the weather was still pleasant in the mornings then); finally, at the precise moment when the two young people were exchanging looks with each other's reflections instead of face to face, a man dressed in black appeared. Initially no more to them than a face and torso as he climbed to the top of the steps, he rapidly acquired legs and planted himself resolutely in front of the mirror, in which he studied his reflection with an expression of exasperated self-satisfaction. Only then did he notice the figures of Percy and Mary reflected on either side of him. Walking over to the doorway, he turned to Mary, bowed, and kissed her hand without saying a single word. Then he turned to Shelley and was obliged to lean backward as he looked up at him, for he was much the shorter of the two. Turning back to the mirror, he observed its progress toward the staircase as it pivoted ninety degrees, thus picking up a goodly portion of the lobby, notably the large

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reception desk, behind which stood Monsieur Verrières, the proprietor, who had not been able to see anything except the backs of the two porters throughout this entire silent scene. The new arrival stepped over to the desk, and it was then Mary noticed that he limped. Leaning his elbow on the polished wooden surface, he stared at the flabbergasted Monsieur Verrières as though he wished to hypnotize him, and said softly, "My name is Noel Byron." (He used his second Christian name so that his carriage, which was a perfect copy of Napoleon's, could be emblazoned with the same initials as well. When Mary learned this later on, she boldly nicknamed him, not Albé, but Nota Bene.) He then turned to watch the antics of a magnificent greyhound that had just entered the lobby. It was not the fact that his guest had looked away precisely when he felt obliged to make some sort of reply that upset Monsieur Verrières, but his inability to make any reply at all in English, since he spoke not a word of the language and knew nothing whatever about modern poetry and racy society gossip. He told the visitor meekly that other English tourists staying in his hotel would perhaps be willing to act as interpreters, and looked imploringly at Shelley, whose lower jaw had dropped precipitously when the stranger had given his name. Stepping forward, Shelley introduced himself and Mary, and then launched into a long, rambling speech of welcome in praise of the poet. They quickly became good friends.

Upon hearing his name, Mary had thought at first of all the rumors linked to Byron, and then of Claire. A few minutes later, after she and Percy had gone back outside—in hopes that the fresh air would restore their composure and return a semblance of order to a world turned upside down by that display of luxury and scandal—she had stammered her misgivings to Percy as they walked along the street, pointing out to him how dangerous the company of such a man could be. Her husband had reacted almost angrily, saying that if the greatest poet of their time was held in contempt, then it was the fault of the times, not the poet, and that Mary would disappoint him greatly by swelling the ranks of the rabble who were always

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quick to disparage genius. To calm him down, and tease him a little bit as well, Mary pretended to become angry herself: he, Shelley, was the greatest poet of their time, and Byron was but a poor second, because since she, Mary, had chosen to live with a poet, she would never admit that he was anything less than the best. Shelley, misunderstanding her jest (but she hadn't really been joking), heatedly defended Byron's poetry and began reciting whole passages of it. A minute later, as they strolled along the edge of the lake while Shelley recited *Childe Harold*, he placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her to him, kissed her, and called her his love. All that day, however, he spoke only of Byron, admiring his lavish generosity and sumptuous retinue (which would be considerably reduced, as it happened, within the next few weeks). In their joint diary Mary noted ironically that it was amusing to hear Percy pleading the cause of luxury, extolling the virtues of an ostentatious display he seemed to consider the only proper setting for the poet's glory; this from Percy who, born to riches, had turned his back on them to elope first with a café proprietor's daughter, then with the daughter of a penniless philosopher whose debts he paid by going into debt himself—Percy, for whom happiness consisted in living on fruits and books in a lowly hut with the woman he loved. An affectionate argument ensued. From that moment on, Byron had become the hero of their diary.

A few days later, through the Chevalier Pictet (a friend of Madame de Staël's, whom the poet had visited at Coppet), Byron rented the elegant Villa Diodati, where Milton had once stayed, while the Shelleys went to live in the more modest Villa Montalègre.

The two villas are within five minutes' walk of each other. Claire is forever trudging along the path through the orchards, full of hope each time she goes to Diodati, and despair each time she returns to Montalègre. Byron is perfectly willing to sleep with her on occasion, but definitely does not intend to saddle himself with this possessive woman, whom he considers to be a fool and about whom he often complains to Shelley.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In any case, he explains boorishly, he already has enough trouble with Polidori, whose sullenness is quite exasperating: the poet has been reduced to taking care of his own physician.

In spite of the Claire problem, which in general takes the form of nocturnal excursions and much ill temper (tired of being rebuffed by her lover, she eventually shuts herself up in Montalègre and lavishes all her affection on little William), the two households are drawn closer together with every passing day. Shelley and Byron have rented a boat together to go sailing on the lake, and they make plans for long excursions up into the mountains. They admire each other enormously, a friendship that openly displeases Polidori and the neglected Claire. In Mary's case, things are more complicated. Byron is friendly to her, even charming, but she has only to leaf through the joint diary to see how the poet's intrusion has subtly disturbed the couple's harmony, already threatened by the invasive presence of Claire, the birth of William, and simple habit.

Every day Shelley sings the praises of his new friend, notes down his remarks, quotes his verse. Mary, on the other hand, hardly ever speaks of Albé, but she must admit she is obsessed by him as well. She admits this to herself and would like to confide in the far-off Emily, just to make things clearer, but for some strange reason she's reluctant to admit it to Percy, reluctant to speak of Albé the way her husband does so freely. Thus she is cheating, and finds herself committing the only sin that truly frightens her: defying Shelley, keeping secrets from him. Since the beginning of June she has been writing another diary, in different guises, but always in secret: whether she's starting a letter to Emily that will never be finished, much less mailed, or recording her feelings in a private notebook kept in constantly changing hiding places—a trick she once used to foil her father's curiosity—she feels guilty of deceit, of treachery.

It's not that she lies in their joint diary. On the contrary: duplicity has driven her to observe the most exacting standards. She shares with Percy every single misgiving caused by his relationship with Albé. When she feels abandoned by her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lover during meandering late-night conversations on the terrace of Diodati, excluded from an exchange in which the two poets exclaim at the harmony between their dissimilarities even more than at their shared interests and opinions, she reports this faithfully, even confessing that it pains her. On the next page Percy scolds her tenderly, criticizes her foolishness, assures her—and she knows he's telling the truth—that he loves her more than anything else in the world. Come, now, she's not going to start being jealous, making scenes! She's not Claire or Polidori . . . and the insulting comparison exasperates her. She writes this down, replying point by point, but without giving in, without swallowing her resentment. She is sincere, truly, and the joint diary continues to fulfill its official function. Percy is now careful never to leave her out of a conversation (Mary is often irritated by the clumsiness of his efforts) and he presses her to join in the outings on the lake, but she refuses.

What is it, then, that she entrusts to this private diary, which she would hide from Percy at all costs? She'd rather die than let him see it! In the first place, she had been engaged in an exercise of mental gymnastics for the last two weeks, since from now on it's understood by Emily and herself that this second diary, this secret compartment, is even more sincere—more intimate, quite honestly not meant for anyone else's eyes—while the first one, the joint diary, must nonetheless remain as sincere as possible. Although she's putting herself in what would seem to be an untenable position, she's still playing the game, trying to reveal as much as she can in the first version (which Percy will read), knowing all the time that she may set down a second version in which she must strip away yet another mask—her own skin, if she has already been truthful in the first account. And she has been, with only one exception. She's willing to humiliate herself by stooping to the level of Claire or Polidori when she reveals her wounded feelings to Percy, but she doesn't want to wound him, and she senses that she risks hurting him now if she lays bare her heart. Not even to avenge her suffering could she bring herself to tell him of the strange fascination Byron holds for her, a fascina-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion that has nothing to do with love. No matter how deeply she looks inside herself, she cannot discover the slightest trace of carnal desire for that man, who is fighting a losing battle against corpulence despite his ascetic habits, and whose flesh inspires in her a kind of repulsion. The idea that he had been or is Claire's lover is also repellent to her. Yet daily contact with him has given her the vague impression that everything she has lived until now, everything she would like to share with Emily or weave into the plot of her novel, the freshest and most intense emotions of her love for Shelley, all this is mere child's play, the naïve exaltation of newly independent adolescents, when compared with real life, that grown-up and adventurous world in which Byron moves with such splendor. His theatrical entrance, his Napoleonic carriage, the aura of prestige surrounding him that seems to ennoble every one of his gestures—these things somewhat overshadow, however unreasonably, the formerly unique (and therefore incomparable) charm of a walk in the country with the bucolic Percy, his botanical observations, his childishly serious enthusiasm for the French revolutionaries or the famous subjects of Plutarch's *Lives*. In just such a way had her father's difficulties and ideals lost their importance two years before, when she was drawn into Shelley's dazzling orbit. And seeing once again how the exclusiveness of her feelings for her husband is giving way to a life in which there is room for comparison, in which Byron is the embodiment of all that is seductively new and exotic, she fears that one day Shelley will come to mean as little to her as her father now does. Of course, she is not like Claire, who loves only famous men, but she is afraid to compare Byron's enormous celebrity with Shelley's obscurity, afraid that she will lose confidence in her husband's genius, which she nurtures and cajoles (it's true that she could never love the world's second-best poet). She's even forced to admit that Byron's professed admiration for his fellow poet has helped greatly to keep that confidence alive. Can she tell Percy this? Can she beg him to leave, to take her away with him, start over again the way they were before, without Albé, without Claire,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

without William, just the two of them? He wouldn't understand. And she reflects that it's precisely because he wouldn't understand, because he's never had the slightest misgiving, because Albé's glory means nothing to him, that perhaps nothing is lost after all, that she can go on loving him. Reaching under the writing desk, she pulls out the secret notebook, opens it, and writes in a firm hand, "I love him."

A second time.

She would like to shout it out loud.

—translated from the French
by Lanie Goodman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tim Dlugos

G-9

I'm at a double wake
in Springfield, for a childhood
friend and his father
who died years ago. I join
my aunt in the queue of mourners
and walk into a brown study,
a sepia room with books
and magazines. The father's
in a coffin; he looks exhumed,
the worse for wear. But where
my friend's remains should be
there's just the empty base
of an urn. Where are his ashes?
His mother hands me
a paper cup with pills:
leucovorin, Zovirax,
and AZT. "Henry
wanted you to have these,"
she sneers. "Take all
you want, for all the good
they'll do." "Dlugos.
Meester Dlugos." A lamp
snaps on. Raquel,
not Welch, the chubby
nurse, is standing by my bed.
It's 6 a.m., time to flush
the heplock and hook up
the I.V. line. False dawn
is changing into day, infusing
the sky above the Hudson
with a flush of light.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My roommate stirs
beyond the pinstriped curtain.
My first time here on G-9,
the AIDS ward, the cheery
D & D Building intentionality
of the decor made me feel
like jumping out a window.
I'd been lying on a gurney
in an E.R. corridor
for nineteen hours, next to
a psychotic druggie
with a voice like Abbie
Hoffman's. He was tied
up, or down, with strips
of cloth (he'd tried to slug
a nurse) and sent up
a grating adenoidal whine
all night. "Nurse . . . nurse . . .
untie me, *please* . . . these
rags have strange powers."
By the time they found
a bed for me, I was in
no mood to appreciate the clever
curtains in my room,
the same fabric exactly
as the drapes and sheets
of a P-town guest house
in which I once—partied? stayed?
All I can remember is
the pattern. Nor did it
help to have the biggest queen
on the nursing staff
clap his hands delightedly
and welcome me to AIDS-land.
I wanted to drop
dead immediately. That
was the low point. Today
these people are my friends,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the process of restoring
me to life a second time.
I can walk and talk
and breathe simultaneously
now. I draw a breath
and sing "Happy Birthday"
to my roommate Joe.
He's 51 today. I didn't think
he'd make it. Three weeks
ago they told him that he had
aplastic anemia, and nothing
could be done. Joe had been
a rotten patient, moaning
operatically, throwing chairs
at nurses. When he got
the bad news, there was
a big change. He called
the relatives with whom
he had been disaffected,
was anointed and communicated
for the first time since the age
of eight when he was raped
by a priest, and made a will.
As death drew nearer, Joe
grew nicer, almost serene.
Then the anemia
began to disappear, not
because of medicines, but
on its own. Ready to die,
it looks like Joe has more
of life to go. He'll go
home soon. "When will *you*
get out of here?" he asks me.
I don't know; when the X-ray
shows no more pneumonia.
I've been here three weeks
this time. What have I
accomplished? Read some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Balzac, spent "quality
time" with friends, come back
from death's door, and
prayed, prayed a lot.
Barry Bragg, a former
lover of a former
lover and a new
Episcopalian, has AIDS too,
and gave me a leatherbound
and gold-trimmed copy of the Office,
the one with all the antiphons.
My list of daily intercessions
is as long as a Russian
novel. I pray about AIDS
last. Last week I made a list
of all my friends who've died
or who are living and infected.
Every day since, I've remembered
someone I forgot to list.
This morning it was Chasen
Gaver, the performance poet
from D.C. I don't know
if he's still around. I liked
him and could never stand
his poetry, which made it
difficult to be a friend,
although I wanted to defend
him one excruciating night
at a Folio reading, where
Chasen snapped his fingers
and danced around spouting
frothy nonsense about Andy
Warhol to the rolling eyes
of self-important "language-
centered" poets, whose dismissive
attitude and ugly manners
were worse by far than anything
that Chasen ever wrote.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Charles was his real name;
a classmate at Antioch
dubbed him "Chasen," after
the restaurant, I guess.
Once I start remembering,
so much comes back.
There are forty-nine names
on my list of the dead,
thirty-two names of the sick.
Cookie Mueller changed
lists Saturday. They all
will, I guess, the living,
I mean, unless I go
before them, in which case
I may be on somebody's
list myself. It's hard
to imagine so many people
I love dying, but no harder
than to comprehend so many
already gone. My beloved
Bobby, maniac and boyfriend.
Barry reminded me that he
had sex with Bobby
on the coat pile at his Christmas
party, two years in a row.
That's the way our life
together used to be, a lot
of great adventures. Who'll
remember Bobby's stories
about driving in his debutante
date's father's white Mercedes
from hole to hole of the golf course
at the poshest country club
in Birmingham at 3 a.m.,
or taking off his clothes
in the redneck bar on a dare,
or working on *Stay Hungry*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as the dresser of a then-
unknown named Schwarzenegger.
Who will be around to anthologize
his purple cracker similes:
"Sweatin' like a nigger
on Election Day," "Hotter
than a half-fucked fox
in a forest fire." The ones
that I remember have to do
with heat, Bobby shirtless,
sweating on the dance floor
of the tiny bar in what is now
a shelter for the indigent
with AIDS on the dockstrip,
stripping shirts off Chuck Shaw,
Barry Bragg and me, rolling
up the torn rags, using them
as pom-poms, then bolting
off down West Street, gracefully
(despite the overwhelming
weight of his inebriation)
vaulting over trash cans
as he sang, "I like to be
in America" in a Puerto Rican
accent. When I pass,
who'll remember, who will care
about these joys and wonders?
I'm haunted by that more
than by the faces
of the dead and dying.
A speaker crackles near
my bed and nurses
streak down the corridor.
The black guy on the respirator
next door bought the farm,
Maria tells me later, but
only when I ask. She has tears

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in her eyes. She'd known him
since his first day on G-9
a long time ago. Will I also
become a fond, fondly regarded
regular, back for stays
the way retired retiring
widowers return to the hotel
in Nova Scotia or Provence
where they vacationed with
their wives? I expect so, although
that's down the road; today's
enough to fill my plate. A bell
rings, like the gong that marks
the start of a fight. It's 10
and Derek's here to make
the bed, Derek who at 16
saw Bob Marley's funeral
in the football stadium
in Kingston, hot tears
pouring down his face.
He sings as he folds
linens, "You can fool
some of the people some
of the time," dancing
a little softshoe as he works.
There's a reason he came in
just now; *Divorce Court*
drones on Joe's TV, and
Derek is hooked. I can't
believe the script is plausible
to him, Jamaican hipster
that he is, but he stands
transfixed by the parade
of faithless wives and screwed-up
husbands. The judge is testy;
so am I, unwilling
auditor of drivel. Phone
my friends to block it out:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David, Jane and Eileen. I missed
the bash for David's magazine
on Monday and Eileen's reading
last night. Jane says that
Marie-Christine flew off
to Marseilles where her mother
has cancer of the brain,
reminding me that AIDS
is just a tiny fragment
of life's pain. Eileen has
been thinking about Bobby, too,
the dinner that we threw
when he returned to New York
after getting sick. Pencil-thin,
disfigured by KS, he held forth
with as much kinetic charm
as ever. What we have
to cherish is not only
what we can recall of how
things were before the plague,
but how we each responded
once it started. People
have been great to me.
An avalanche of love
has come my way
since I got sick, and not
just moral support.
Jaime's on the board
of PEN's new fund
for AIDS; he's helping out.
Don Windham slipped a check
inside a note, and Brad
Gooch got me something
from the Howard Brookner Fund.
Who'd have thought when we
dressed up in ladies'
clothes for a night for a hoot
in Brad ("June Buntt") and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Howard ("Lili La Lean")'s suite
at the Chelsea that things
would have turned out this way:
Howard dead at 35, Chris Cox
("Kay Sera Sera")'s friend Bill
gone too, "Bernadette of Lourdes"
(guess who) with AIDS,
God knows how many positive.
Those 14th Street wigs and enormous
stingers and Martinis don't
provoke nostalgia for a time
when love and death were less
inextricably linked, but
for the stories we would tell
the morning after, best
when they involved our friends,
second-best, our heroes.
J.J. Mitchell was a master
of the genre. When he learned
he had AIDS, I told him
he should write them down.
His mind went first. I'll tell you
one of his best. J.J. was
Jerome Robbins' houseguest
at Bridgehampton. Every morning
they would have a contest
to see who could finish
the *Times* crossword first.
Robbins always won, until
a day when he was clearly
baffled. Grumbling, scratching
over letters, he finally
threw his pen down. "J.J.,
tell me what I'm doing wrong."
One clue was "Great 20th-c.
choreographer." The solution
was "Massine," but Robbins
had placed his own name

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the space. Every word
around it had been changed
to try to make the puzzle
work, except that answer.
At this point there'd be
a horsey laugh from J.J.
—"Isn't that *great*?"
he'd say through clenched
teeth ("Locust Valley lockjaw").
It was, and there were lots
more where that one came from,
only you can't get there anymore.
He's dropped into the maw
waiting for the G-9
denizens and for all flesh,
as silent as the hearts
that beat upon the beds
up here: the heart of the drop-
dead beautiful East Village
kid who came in yesterday,
Charles Frost's heart nine inches
from the spleen they're taking
out tomorrow, the heart of
the demented girl whose screams
roll down the hallways
late at night, hearts that long
for lovers, for reprieve,
for old lives, for another chance.
My heart, so calm most days,
sinks like a brick
to think of all that heartache.
I've been staying sane with
program tools, turning everything
over to God "as I understand
him." I don't understand him.
Thank God I read so much
Calvin last spring; the absolute
necessity of blind obedience

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to a sometimes comforting,
sometimes repellent, always
incomprehensible Source
of light and life stayed
with me. God can seem
so foreign, a parent
from another country,
like my Dad and his own
father speaking Polish
in the kitchen. I wouldn't
trust a father or a God
too much like me, though.
That is why I pack up all
my cares and woes, and load them
on the conveyor belt, the speed
of which I can't control, like
Chaplin on the assembly line
in *Modern Times* or Lucy on TV.
I don't need to run
machines today. I'm standing
on a moving sidewalk
headed for the dark
or light, whatever's there.
Duncan Hannah visits, and
we talk of out-of-body
experiences. His was
amazing. Bingeing on vodka
in his dorm at Bard, he woke
to see a naked boy
in fetal posture on the floor.
Was it a corpse, a classmate,
a pickup from the blackout
of the previous night? Duncan
didn't know. He struggled
out of bed, walked over
to the youth, and touched
his shoulder. The boy turned;
it was Duncan himself.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My own experience was
milder, didn't make me flee
screaming from the room
as Duncan did. It happened
on a Tibetan meditation
weekend at the Cowley Fathers'
house in Cambridge.
Michael Koonsman led it,
healer whose enormous paws
directed energy. He touched
my spine to straighten up
my posture, and I gasped
at the rush. We were chanting
to Tara, goddess of compassion
and peace, in the basement chapel
late at night. I felt myself
drawn upward, not levitating
physically, but still somehow
above my body. A sense
of bliss surrounded me.
It lasted ten or fifteen
minutes. When I came down,
my forehead hurt. The spot
where the "third eye" appears
in Buddhist art felt
as though someone had pushed
a pencil through it.
The soreness lasted for a week.
Michael wasn't surprised.
He did a lot of work
with people with AIDS
in the epidemic's early days,
but when he started losing
weight and having trouble
with a cough, he was filled
with denial. By the time
he checked into St. Luke's,
he was in dreadful shape.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The respirator down his throat
squelched the contagious
enthusiasm of his voice,
but he could still spell out
what he wanted to say
on a plastic Ouija board
beside his bed. When
the doctor who came in
to tell him the results
of his bronchoscopy said,
"Father, I'm afraid I have
bad news," Michael grabbed
the board and spelled,
"The truth is always
Good News." After he died,
I had a dream in which
I was a student in a class
that he was posthumously
teaching. With mock annoyance
he exclaimed, "Oh, Tim!
I can't believe you really think
that AIDS is a disease!"
There's evidence in that
direction, I'll tell him
if the dream recurs: the shiny
hamburger-in-lucite look
of the big lesion on my face;
the smaller ones I daub
with makeup; the loss
of forty pounds in a year;
the fatigue that comes on
at the least convenient times.
The symptoms float like algae
on the surface of the grace
that buoys me up today.
Arthur comes in with
the Sacrament, and we have
to leave the room (Joe's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Italian family has arrived
for birthday cheer) to find
some quiet. Walk out
to the breezeway, where
it might as well be
August for the stifling
heat. On Amsterdam,
pedestrians and drivers are
oblivious to our small aerie,
as we peer through the grille
like cloistered nuns. Since
leaving G-9 the first time,
I always slow my car down
on this block, and stare up
at this window, to the unit
where my life was saved.
It's strange how quickly
hospitals feel foreign
when you leave, and how normal
their conventions seem as soon
as you check in. From below,
it's like checking out the windows
of the West Street Jail; hard
to imagine what goes on there,
even if you know firsthand.
The sun is going down as I
receive communion. I wish
the rite's familiar magic
didn't dull my gratitude
for this enormous gift.
I wish I had a closer personal
relationship with Christ,
which I know sounds corny
and alarming. Janet Campbell
gave me a remarkable ikon
the last time I was here;
Christ is in a chair, a throne,
and St. John the Divine,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an androgyne who looks a bit
like Janet, rests his head
upon the Savior's shoulder.
James Madden, priest of Cowley,
dead of cancer earlier
this year at 39, gave her
the image, telling her not to
be afraid to imitate St. John.
There may come a time when
I'm unable to respond with words,
or works, or gratitude to AIDS;
a time when my attitude
caves in, when I'm as weak
as the men who lie across
the dayroom couches hour
after hour, watching sitcoms,
drawing blanks. Maybe
my head will be shaved
and scarred from surgery;
maybe I'll be pencil-
thin and paler than
a ghost, pale as the vesper
light outside my window now.
It would be good to know
that I could close my eyes
and lean my head back
on his shoulder then,
as natural and trusting
as I'd be with a cherished
love. At this moment,
Chris walks in, Christopher
Earl Wiss of Kansas City
and New York, my lover,
my last lover, my first
healthy and enduring relationship
in sobriety, the man
with whom I choose
to share what I have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

left of life and time.
This is the hardest
and happiest moment
of the day. G-9
is no place to affirm
a relationship. Two hours
in a chair beside my bed
after eight hours of work
night after night for weeks
. . . it's been a long haul,
and Chris gets tired.
Last week he exploded,
"I hate this, I hate your
being sick and having AIDS
and lying in a hospital
where I can only see you
with a visitor's pass. I hate
that this is going to
get worse." I hate it,
too. We kiss, embrace,
and Chris climbs into bed
beside me, to air-mattress
squeaks. Hold on. We hold on
to each other, to a hope
of how we'll be when I get out.
Let him hold on, please
don't let him lose his
willingness to stick with me,
to make love and to make
love work, to extend
the happiness we've shared.
Please don't let AIDS
make me a monster
or a burden is my prayer.
Too soon, Chris has to leave.
I walk him to the elevator
bank, then totter back
so Raquel can open my I.V.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again. It's not even
mid-evening, but I'm nodding
off. My life's so full, even
(especially?) when I'm here
on G-9. When it's time
to move on to the next step,
that will be a great adventure,
too. Helena Hughes, Tibetan
Buddhist, tells me that
there are three stages in death.
The first is white, like passing
through a thick but porous wall.
The second stage is red;
the third is black, and then
you're finished, ready
for the next event. I'm glad
she has a road map, but I don't
feel the need for one myself.
I've trust enough in all
that's happened in my life,
the unexpected love
and gentleness that rushes in
to fill the arid spaces
in my heart, the way the city
glow fills up the sky
above the river, making it
seem less than night. When
Joe O'Hare flew in last week,
he asked what were the best
times of my New York years;
I said "Today," and meant it.
I hope that death will lift me
by the hair like an angel
in a Hebrew myth, snatch me with
the strength of sleep's embrace,
and gently set me down
where I'm supposed to be,
in just the right place.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Andrew Klavan

The Pond

Child-crafted clouds, all sheen and fleece and curlicues,
as a girl, with her tongue in her teeth, would have made them,
the point of her crayon squashed against the page.
One came across the mountains, then another came;
one shadow of one ran across the grass and then another;
but the small apple tree and even the great maples
flagged in a heat that hung like rain,
that grayed the air with sweat under
the stark, flat, white medallion of the sun;
a swimmer's heat that even the woman on the porch steps
panted in. Still, she would not go in the pond.

The small frogs at the rim of it sprang in unison,
slapped the water and dove down at the first bare footsteps
from the summer house. The tadpoles in the sand—
they lay wary, some with their tails and some
all belly and aspic legs and some
hung breathing at the top, not fish, not lizards.
They all darted deeper when one of us stepped in.

Eerie and still in the weeds at the water's edge,
a frog the size of an infant's head, stared,
its gullet throbbing, half-submerged and luminously yellow,
squeezing out a voice that was like a gong,
while she—and she was the most graceful of the guests—
graceful as a girl and sweet as one,
earnest, reticent as a girl and as severe—
still she, of all of us, would not go in,
would not go swimming in the pond and flinched when she
was urged to.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And she made little gestures with her hands,
and she made nervous movements with her lips,
and she said she did not like the dark upon the surface
through which, when she was in beyond her waist,
she could not see the things—she called them things—
that went along the bottom where her ankles were.
And it was no use arguing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Alice Fulton

Silencer

When snow soothes the view, it doesn't pay to reason
with each shapely flake of its sinless topsoil.
Better admire the crystal's moronic tolerance.
Better call the proud happy,
the past fixed and finished lives
convicted parts of the history.
To live is to be a threshold that persists.

The mind wants to rest its reasons
against the framed snowstorm it keeps inside
the living room, caged in Zenith or something Japanese.
It wants to meditate upon the marrowless Zen
ecstasy that froths between the channels,
to think the moon's the sort of thing
toward which the earth is tending: over.
Over and out. The mind thinks people

die because they have no reason to live or die
for their reason for living since a reason for
living is also a good reason for dying. Then the living
invent more reasonable deaths since the suicide's invention
might be catching. The reason for life might
be to make us want to leave. When friends advise

the mouth to consume more cruciferous vegetables,
the mind to swaddle itself in thermal
thinking, rent a screwball movie,
Pillowtalk, all winter,
the mind thinks something impolite.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Once a force called *she* exists
it can't be made to de-exist.
Though the centuries spend as stuff
before the ongoing (in which nothing's gone
for good) happens to snap cells into something
singular and capable of saying "I"
might be *forever* squared. Welcome
to the blitz indifferent and long-

lived as grit. What a lottery win
it is to live. She was a channel through which
energy traveled in a way it won't again.
But the mind's sucrose labyrinths insist
there is a soul: think surround sound
from hidden speakers, think air-
grams, weightless blue. The mind thinks
when death usurps my turbulence that lightening or loss
goes up in soul. It thinks if only.
Then builds tough stuccos of no, ending with no
matter how it waits she won't return.

In the meantime there are common flickers
on the lawn, words to whittle, friends to kid.
In the meantime minds pose and put
each other on with drastic poise.
And though the sun is lustrous
on the snow, minds want to switch on
every watt inside. They want to rest their every
reason against the gusts of blank repose
within their sets and make their blizzard babies.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For In Them The Void Becomes Eloquent

Dusting under nuptial covers,
the virgin working for the matron
wondered what love had been. A light
housekeeper, she tried different accents. Sixteen.
She stressed the light
in her job title, made believe
she was in charge of bits that drill the dark
for those at sea. A *light*house keeper, she.

The virgin borrowed her mother's vacuum, that was how
she got the job. How she made the windows quiver

like drops about to fall.
Ammonia smelled mean
but left no streaks. It grieved her to think
bright bannisters continued
while humans would be dead in seconds.
Once she'd worked for a Home: the old stowed away
their mashed potatoes in the dresser drawers.

God was infinitely excellent,
thus sin was infinitely bad, the Little Sisters said.

The forever fire was precisely right
as punishment, being eternal
but no longer than eternal.
God couldn't lose for winning, she observed.
In him the void became eloquent, a sound

without knowledge, too high to be heard.
The vacuum's beige fury burned the dust.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It swelled like a male thing:
sooty grouse or lizard. Boys wearing autopsied light
shows for clothes were her firm favorites.
She'd work two hours for four dollars
to buy their latest, play and play it
till she had the lyrics
written in her hand.

One day light would scalpel into grooves
and make a cleaner music.

She'd discover new foods—Gruyere cheese, whole wheat,
learn to say "quiche," obtain a Visa
and be gone to stay.
Ammonia smelled mean but left no streaks.
Her mother thought this was beneath her.
Yet her mother's vacuum was what she needed
to turn down

the dark like nuptial covers,
to vivisect the night with her bare hands.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Wake of the Blackfish: A Memoir of George Kirstein

W. S. Merwin

Late in March, in the year I would turn thirty, he wrote me a letter about sea monsters.

He and I had never met, and he addressed me, on the stationery of *The Nation* magazine, formally, with a colon after my name, and signed himself George G. Kirstein, over his title, Publisher.

He began and ended his letter by speaking of some poems of mine which *The Nation* had been publishing, to do with the sea. It was a subject that had occupied my imagination since childhood, and some of the writings of Conrad, first discovered in a book that was a present from my mother on, I think, my thirteenth birthday, in the coal-mining town far from the sea where we were living then, had wakened in me the craving to write. But my actual experience of the sea, apart from a couple of Atlantic crossings, was limited almost entirely to some sailing, in summer, with friends almost as inept as I was, on an old Dutch fishing boat, off the south coast of En-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gland. The dilapidation of the neglected vessel (she had been named *Curlew* at some wishful moment in the distant past) and our own lack of skill and knowledge, along with the miserable weather, the cold rains and fogs, and the complicated tides and currents of the south coast, impressed and greatly magnified the time and its details. They were not extensive but they were, and they remained, immediate, and they came to focus years of reading and daydreaming about the sea into the writing of the poems that had occasioned George's letter. He said that the subject of the poems spoke to a prejudice of his own. "The sea is one of my passions and I have spent a considerable part of my life on it."

He particularly wanted to say something about a poem of mine that recounted a sighting of a sea monster, a presence disputed among those who had seen it. I need hardly say that I had never beheld a sea monster, and my piece was a complete fiction. But according to George, the poem was "particularly real to me because I experienced it." And his letter suddenly took on the ageless tone of innumerable sailing yarns. "I was bound for Halifax from Boston in my old forty-foot yawl and was off watch in the middle of the night. The boy at the wheel was drowsy because, as you know, the light on the binnacle has a hypnotic effect. Suddenly there was a loud intake of breath just ahead of the bow and the monster disappeared into the black ocean. What had happened, of course, was that we had nudged a sleeping blackfish, but the discussion has never ended as to whether it was the monster or whether we saw it."

In the poem the "discussion," after a long sighting in a familiar place in broad daylight, led to an ultimate doubt of the habitually accepted distinction between the waking world and the world of sleep—or whatever is the waking world's obverse. It was not a doubt that George would ever have entertained or admitted, and it may have been one of the many possibilities that he closed off more and more curtly with age. By the time he wrote me he had long since evolved a bluff manner designed to repel, as a general rule, sustained speculation about any such matters. It was one of the outer reaches of an extreme reticence where feelings were concerned. A publisher

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

George Kirstein.

who sends a letter to someone whose work he has been publishing, whether or not they may have corresponded before, is not, on the face of it, committing an act of dangerous self-exposure. But I realized later, and most of all since George's death, how exceptional it must have been for him to do such a thing, including its introductory bit of personal history. Of course he wrote all the time to people he did not know, but seldom, I think, to artists or to poets even if he had published them, simply because he liked their work. He was shy about poetry, and he pretended to know nothing about it. But the truth was that he had majored in English at Harvard and had written his thesis on Hardy's *The Dynasts*. Yet he had come to affect a plain downright businessman's and man-of-action's presumed ignorance—a sympathetic ignorance, to be sure—about a number of things. About the arts in general, and as a matter of course about "modern poetry." With music he had gone further, and he flatly declared, as a kind of tic, that it made no sense to him, and that he could not tell one piece from another. And yet at Harvard he had sat for hours on end listening to Kirkpatrick practicing Bach.

If his writing to me as he did was in fact as eccentric for him

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as I suppose, I imagine that it was one of a considerable number of departures from habit which followed more or less naturally from the new phase in his life that had been marked by his buying and, indeed, taking over *The Nation* magazine only a matter of months before. I did not know much about the background of that decision, and for that matter seldom found it easy to elicit consecutive biographical information about George. I expected that he may have been somewhat more free with accounts of himself with some of his own contemporaries. There was, after all, a generation between us. I know that the business side of the decision was something that he approached with confidence based on an impressive variety of administrative and financial experience. I never knew—of course I never knew—how much money he had, and once I learned that he "had money" it seemed to me that I should not know any more about it than that. His own feelings about money were intricate, as I would come to realize. They included contempt and attachment in indeterminate shadings. "Money," he told me once, much later on, "is something that everybody is neurotic about." He liked to make it plain if, for example, the matter of some private expense was raised, that while he thought little of money or its hypnotically entangling effects, he had enough of it to live as he pleased, with no financial anxiety, and to own a forty-foot yacht and do things like buying *The Nation* magazine when the spirit moved him. And he told me more than once that he had not started out rich. His father, he said, had thought it would not be good for the boys to have too much at the beginning, and he started them out with $25,000 each and that was that. "And I did not put the rest together by trusting deadbeats," he said to me years later, referring to my own foolishness in putting my savings in the custody of a glib welcher, a friend of friends, in California, and losing them as a result.

On one of George's first jobs he had been in charge of the horses (he knew nothing about horses and I doubt whether he had ever been on one) for one of the big film companies, MGM I believe, that made westerns in Hollywood. He had been a floor manager at Bloomingdales for a while. He talked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with some experience about the selling of garden furniture. He had worked long and devotedly in labor relations and had written a book about it, and during the war had served on the War Labor Relations Board under Roosevelt. For some years he had been executive director of the regional board of the Hospitalization Insurance Plan. All of his actual business enterprises, he once told me, had done very well for him. That was the way he put it, too, as though he had been, more than anything else, lucky. It had come to him naturally.

That was the way things had happened to his own father, too, from the way he described it. Clearly he admired his father, who must have had an abiding influence on him. George told me that his father, as a young man, had been the manager of a professional baseball team, and in later years had been the partner of Lincoln Filene, at Filene's Department Store, in Boston. Lincoln Filene himself was obviously a strong and original person, and George's father, the younger man in the partnership, had probably learned a great deal from him. The currents of progressive liberalism of the 1880's and '90's, the European-American immigrant ferment represented by writers such as Carl Schurz, had appealed to the daring and iconoclastic idealism in both men, and George was proud to tell me that they had made Filene's one of the first large business enterprises in Boston, certainly, and indeed in the whole country, to turn the stocks of the company over to the employees, and have the workers really own the business. In so doing, George admitted, Filene and George's father were far ahead of their employees, many of whom were shocked by the proposal and opposed to it and its responsibilities.

I did not realize until some time later just how distinguished a figure George's father had been, in the Boston of the early years of the century, but I knew that the combination of skeptical, secular, no-nonsense liberalism and a reforming yet essentially prudent view of the functions of the social order had been there as an extremely impressive example in George's childhood and had provided a basis for George's values in politics and in many other aspects of his life. One could hear it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from the way George spoke of him, and evidently it was so, even though his father must have seemed essentially out of reach. He was so much older than George—but most human relations, for George, appeared to belong to distance.

In any event, the business part of the decision to buy *The Nation* was not hard to imagine, later. It was the part that had to do with *The Nation's* character—a magazine seriously concerned with intellectual and artistic opinions and events—that was more daring, more intricate and shadowy. At Harvard George may have been following his own real interests, or he may have been trying to resolve his inevitably contradictory feelings about the influence of his brother Lincoln, his elder by a few years, whose dazzling career there was well-known to everyone who was interested in the arts. Among Lincoln's achievements, as many who are acquainted with the era know, was the magazine *Hound & Horn*, which Lincoln founded in his sophomore year, with R.P. Blackmur editing and contributing. With its first issue the review was recognized as one of the most distinguished publications on literature and the arts in the country. Lincoln himself wrote and painted brilliantly and easily. And Lincoln had known, and knew, just about everyone who had to do with the arts—certainly in that part of the world—and it must have seemed to George that Lincoln also knew pretty much everything worth knowing about them. Lincoln was not bashful about conveying such an impression. His tolerance of his much younger brother's emergent impressions was probably distant at best. His patience with interests and opinions other than his own was not something for which he was known then or later. George, with no single driving original talent, must have felt that the world of the arts, and to a great degree the arts themselves, had been pre-empted by Lincoln, and that in that sphere, above all, he was constantly in Lincoln's shadow.

And besides Lincoln there was Mina, some years older than her brothers, and Mina too had constituted herself a patrician authority on the arts that interested her, on culture in a grand and somewhat brittle sense, on social requisites, and she was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

already on the way to becoming the scholar who would edit Proust's letters and write a life of Bizet, as well as several lighter accounts of privileged décors. She was closer than George to either of his parents, his busy father or his mother, who had been brought up to wealth and a familiarity with the arts in Europe and the United States, and to a love of opulent furnishings. In George's references to her—they were little more than that—she sounded somewhat cold and autocratic. He spoke as though it was really Mina who had brought up both Lincoln and himself, as though their mother was not much with them, or with him, during those years. But Mina, by the time she was overseeing George's upbringing, was already busy making a social milieu for herself in Boston, and George had felt out of place among her interests and associates.

He had discovered that he liked to sail. His life of sailing had begun in Marblehead, where the family spent their summers, and his father may have had something to do with the choice of his first boat. Neither Mina nor Lincoln, he noted more than once, was in the least interested in boats or in sailing. His memory of the years of Mina's unofficial guardianship had crystallized into an image of the day when his childhood was over, and George, aged eighteen or so, had contrived to sink his boat in Marblehead Harbor. It must have been quite thoroughly sunk, even if not in very deep water, and I am not sure that he ever told me the immediate fate of the boat itself. The part of the occasion that remained most vivid for George and always brought back to him a flicker of wry pleasure was the recollection of him stomping home, dripping the foul mud of the harbor bottom, his clothes soaked with it, his topsiders squelching and slopping, and the rest of him burning with adolescent rage and humiliation, and flinging open the door to find Mina in the act of serving tea to a—perhaps the names are still there in the diary. Obviously his sister's face rose before him each time as he stood there again, dripping in the doorway, and in that connection too he told me a little about the carpets—even though it was the summer house. And by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

comparison, something about the elegance of the house in Boston.

Considering the influence of his family on him during those years it is not surprising that George turned to boats and sailing, but it is perhaps remarkable that he kept any interest in the arts at all. He seems to have reached beyond the more immediate presences of Mina, and for a while of his mother, and of Lincoln, and their pronounced certainties, and to have drawn perhaps more than he knew upon the figure, more remote than any of them, of his father, who let him alone to make up his own mind, as neither George's mother, nor Mina, nor Lincoln, ever did, if they paid any attention to him at all.

And George's father no doubt took at least a polite interest in the arts, an administrative and practical interest—he was for years President of the Boston Public Library—but he was also involved not only in the business but in civic matters and to some degree, indirectly, in local politics. George told of a delegation of businessmen that included Lincoln Filene and his father, which had called upon a newly elected mayor of Boston. We had been talking about the delinquencies of the city of Boston, which George always insisted was the most corrupt city in the United States. It was a subject to which George warmed periodically, and it was a distinction that he claimed without qualification for his native town, something beyond dispute and eternal. Chicago was as nothing, by comparison. The corruption of Boston, the impossibility of decent government there, had become a benchmark for George, against which he could measure the relative difficulty of decent government or honest and responsible journalism, or upright civic behavior, anywhere else, and we returned from time to time to one of the most flamboyant figures produced by the peculiarity of Boston, Mayor Curley, who had run one of his legendary mayoral campaigns from jail. Curley indeed became so garish a symbol of the aspect of Boston that George had fixed upon, that I always imagine it must have been Curley himself who had received the delegation of businessmen George told about. But even Curley's career, interminable as it must have seemed to many, could scarcely have gone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back far enought for that, and so there must have been an earlier figure with the prerequisites for the part. The story, in any event, is that the delegation, once the doors were closed, told the new mayor that they were only too well aware of the temptations of their city, and that they wanted an honest mayoral administration. They said they realized that anything of the kind would involve a mayor's passing up opportunities of a shady nature which from time to time would appear in his path. And they said they wanted to compensate him in advance for his abstinence on such occasions. They wanted to make an honest administration worth his while, and to that end they were there to offer him (this was in the early years of the century) a quarter of a million dollars. And he had laughed at them.

Whatever its basis in history, and whatever apparent naïveté it suggests, the story reveals some of the things that George continued, stubbornly, to believe. One was the possibility of combining, even in circumstances of inevitable corruption, business enterprise with civic responsibility, and responsibility of a personal and at the same time somewhat quixotic sort. Though the mayor in the story laughed and the delegation apparently got nowhere, its very existence was the kind of thing that kept the country from being more rotten and destructive than it was. And the delegation had been formed in this case not of penniless reformers but of affluent and successful members of the business community. George saw private wealth in a variety of ways, some of them inconsistent and some of them fluctuating, but somewhere he clung to the belief that it was a public trust, even that it was owned on sufferance, and that it entailed a moral obligation to benefit the public in some way. The obligation could be ignored, of course, and often was, but that was simply one of the many prevalent forms of irresponsibility with which we were all familiar. George did not apply this assumption like a rule—I was surprised sometimes to notice how tolerant he seemed to be of the mindless self-indulgence of some of the rich whom he knew—but it figured among the grounds for his contempt for the heedless conduct of others, from time to time. I do not want to suggest

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that George's character was simply a reflection of family influences, but his were uncommonly imposing, and I think that in his views of civic and political responsibility his father probably was a model that was never seriously questioned.

His father was a reader, and combined a respect for books with his sense of civic purpose by serving, as I have said, as President of the Boston Public Library. George's love of Mark Twain, and of biography, were obviously set in motion by his father, who read both constantly, sometimes aloud. His father may have had something to do, also, with fostering George's lifelong liking and admiration for England and the English, though the nautical history of England certainly nourished both, later on. If George's relation to the more visual and physical arts was at best hesitant by the time he entered Harvard, he was a confirmed reader of history and of English literature. His private exploration of the arts—as independently as possible from the comments of Mina and Lincoln—must have been in poetry, leading him to enthusiasm for the work of John Livingston Lowes (some of which, of course, focused on Coleridge's great nautical ballad) and on Hardy's long sea poem.

But I doubt whether it ever occurred to him at Harvard that he would ever do anything after college that was in any way involved with literature. He had friends in publishing, but if he ever considered that it may still have seemed uncomfortably close to Lincoln's world, and anyway, most of George's friends in publishing houses were in Boston, which George wanted to leave. His sister and brother appeared to have constituted themselves the artistic representatives of his generation of the family. His father did not try to influence them, but according to George he thought they were both completely crazy (though they were both so young when he died that the opinion itself must have been a leaping to conclusions.) George suggested that Mina and Lincoln had more or less consigned to their younger brother the role of ordinary businessman. It is hard to imagine George ever having been simply pushed into something and staying there against his will. Somewhere along the way he must have adopted a view of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

himself that was basically similar to theirs, and he settled into the part without, clearly, altogether disliking it. Over the next decades the main field of his knowledge and activity was labor relations, the arbitration of labor disputes, and his leisure was spent sailing, in the summers. He made enough money doing what he thought he ought to do, to be able to live as he pleased.

George said that it came as some surprise to Mina and Lincoln when they learned, in the mid-fifties, that he was planning to buy *The Nation*. He may have been assuming some of their response to his deliberate breaking out of the course to which he felt they had more or less relegated him. He thought they considered it somewhat presumptuous of him to take over a publication that devoted a section—even if it were only "the back of the book"—and one with a long and distinguished history, to the arts. He had expected, and he noted, their skepticism and their patronizing. He quoted Mina saying, "What do *you* know about running a magazine?" and what she meant, he said, was "What do you know about editing anything to do with books and the arts?" He thought he would try. He was approaching fifty. It was what he wanted to do, and it gave him a field in which to exercise his interests in politics, history, economics as well as what he thought of as an outsider's appropriately limited interest in the arts. The history of the magazine, which was nearing its centennial year, had also attracted him. It had been a part of educated conversation all his life, and its place in the minds of liberal Northerners at the time of the Civil War and during the decades that followed it had probably had something to do with *The Nation*'s indispensable place on the list of publications that George's father consistently read and generally approved. In deciding to buy *The Nation* George was at once, and quite deliberately, maintaining a connection with much that he honored and felt indebted to in the past, and adopting a new relation to it and to an indeterminate number of other things. This was the man who had written to me about nudging the vanished blackfish.

He wrote to me again some six weeks later to say that he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

planned to be in Boston in early June to attend a Harvard reunion, and would like to meet if it were convenient, and see whether we might make some "sailing plans for the summer on my boat . . . along the home shores instead of the waters around England."

The man who climbed the five flights of stairs to the top floor apartment where I was living on West Cedar Street in Boston had short curly gray hair, thin on top, and as I saw when he reached the landing outside the door, a face starting to flow downward, with a large rounded nose and embedded eyes, mournful and prepared to be amused. He was wearing what must have seemed appropriate for Harvard at reunions: one of those open-necked knitted cotton short-sleeved shirts that seem to have been around forever, signifying the same kind of occasions. And he was carrying a six-pack as a present.

I have since seen a photograph of George as he had been only four years before that meeting, and I was struck by how much his appearance had changed in that short time. In the picture his hair was dark and he still had it all. The meltdown of his face had not even begun. It was still smooth and probably not very different from the way it had looked when he was a student at Harvard. In the picture he was already a little broad across the middle, but by the time he got to the top of the steps on West Cedar Street he had acquired a pronounced bulge at the waistline. But he was not helplessly out of breath, though he was a heavy smoker. Almost everyone seems to feel that many flights of stairs require comment, born of fatigue or embarrassment or resentment. I think George simply said, "Must keep you in shape," and came on in, scarcely trying to hide his curiosity, about this oddity living in Boston, where George had grown up.

And it is still hard to imagine what he saw. If he had been looking for the sort of place where he or many of his friends might have lived, the apartment would certainly have appeared to him to be quite impossible. Starting with the stairs. Starting before them, at the entrance, which was just past the really old and acceptable red brick houses on Beacon Hill. This building was a yellow brick job dating from well into the pres-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ent century—probably about the same age as George. I never noticed in him much imaginative relish for buildings, outdoors or in—much feeling for architecture or the decors and furnishings and accretions that people grew, part deliberately and part unconsciously, around their lives. So to him I suppose the place was unimaginable. At the time I thought it was just fine. Five relatively large rooms on the top floor, and from each of them a view of the Charles River or the roofscapes of Beacon Hill. I had been led to it the summer before, within hours of setting foot in Boston, and the finding of it had seemed a triumph. My guide (though only to the street door and not up the five flights) had been a short, sagging out-of-breath woman, a kind of spirit of Beacon Hill, where she had lived all her life and now ran a real estate business of sorts, an informal, word-of-mouth apartment-renting agency, out of her own small flat on the Hill, which was stuffed with old family furniture, its floors deep in ancient and rather dirty hooked rugs, the walls invisible behind shelves of old books, glass paintings, marine paintings, cases of crumbling mounted butterflies, and large, dark, unidentifiable still-lifes behind glass.

Smelling a little of stale bath salts and her cats, she had thrown a shawl over her blouse, though it was August, and puffed ahead of me down the stairs and along the street, and then had handed me the key at the street door and gone home to wait. Not for long. Even through the dirty panes the light from the river filled the empty rooms, and I went straight back to sign the lease, in which I agreed to pay seventy-five dollars a month.

Though I had never lived in Boston, the move there represented to me a kind of homecoming. Seven years I had spent in Europe, with feelings about the States changing and revolving. The urge to get back to the States was generated in part—and more than I was then ready to admit—by the deepening frustrations and claustrophobia of an unfortunate marriage in England. But besides that I felt a need to renew contact with something—I was not sure what it was, but I thought of it as being my own. Yet I did not want to go back to the States to take up an academic career, as so many of my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

friends had done. Finally, in 1956, I was offered a grant of three thousand dollars to spend a year in association with The Poets' Theater in Cambridge, and try to write a play. It was just what I wanted, and the five empty rooms and their echoes seemed like the beginning of everything.

I furnished them, a little reluctantly at first. Some things came from the Morgan Memorial and some from the piles of furniture that people in those days regularly tossed onto the sidewalk for the dump truck; and some were odds and ends lent by friends. George stood in a front room that looked down onto West Cedar Street, and seemed uncertain where to sit down. There was an old green chaise longue from the Goodwill Industries, and a rather small rocking chair. Finally he lowered himself into a wicker armchair—or what looked like a wicker armchair. Actually it was the remains of another rocking chair that had lost a rocker and finally washed up onto a rooftop across the street, where it leaned against the chimney for a month or so while I admired its undiminished dignity, its easy acquaintance with the weather; and one day, meeting someone from the building, I inquired about it and was given it for carrying it away. Its other rocker was removed, the accumulated soot was scrubbed from the wicker, something was folded to make a cushion for the seat. George no doubt found it a little lower than he had come to expect an armchair to be, but then, at that moment he had decided that he did not know what to expect. Chairs were lower.

Chronologically, of course, that was the youngest that I would ever see George. But as I recall that meeting I see that he was younger, at that moment, in other senses as well. The trip to Boston as the new publisher of *The Nation*, the Harvard reunion, the time of year with the prospect of the summer's sailing, new departures of all kinds, had infused him with a youthful buoyancy and an openness to the unfamiliar, both of which I glimpsed more and more rarely in later years.

He had come to Harvard, he told me, to try to drum up money for *The Nation*, and he was meeting a series of people who were in town for the reunion, as well as residents of Boston and Cambridge. He told me a few of the names. He was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

asking, he told me, for contributions "in five figures, and not the lowest five figures," and he was getting them. He talked of some of his plans for the magazine, its temper, it position, the audience he hoped to reach.

And we talked about Richard Blackmur, who we discovered was a mutual friend. Blackmur had been my own mentor in college. I had revered the low-keyed luminous acuity of his insight, which played constantly over everything literary and non-literary. He was certainly the most perceptive and spacious literary intelligence I had ever been close to, someone of a profound, private, and—I believed—reliable, indeed oracular wisdom, however useless it may have been to him in his own life. I have never seriously doubted that that was so. It was Blackmur, I learned later, who made it possible for me to stay in graduate school studying Romance Languages (supposedly) when the more conventional members of the faculty had quite properly determined to boot me out.

George had known Blackmur when they were both young men: they were nearly of the same age, with Blackmur the elder by a couple of years. Just enough, perhaps, at that time in their lives, to lend a certain substance to the air of seniority which I imagine—and I have heard—cloaked Blackmur at every stage of his life. The age difference may have been further emphasized by the fact that Blackmur was working for George's brother Lincoln, on *Hound & Horn*.

There was then, and there has been ever since, something legendary about *Hound & Horn*, a kind of iconographic status that can be accounted for only partly by the quality of the writing published, the roster of contributors, the level of distinction that it maintained, or even the length of its existence, which was not so short as to present no continuity at all, but brief enough to add to its posthumous reputation some of the romantic lustre associated with poets dead in their youth. No doubt there was something legendary about Lincoln himself, at Harvard, which contributed to the attitude toward the magazine, at the outset at least. And there was clearly a very different kind of legendary quality about Blackmur himself. I had heard vague references to it from the handful of people

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I had met who had known Blackmur in his somewhat ancient youth. To George, Blackmur must have appeared as a foil to the elaborately connected Lincoln—Blackmur, penniless and a preternaturally curious outsider, a born exile fascinated by the rococo convolutions of power, living a few steps away from the Harvard Common but preferring to educate himself rather than formally matriculate at the college, Blackmur already writing an essay a day, already seeing himself as the "conservative non-conformist," the secular conscience. Blackmur in the years that would inform his later commentary on Joyce's young hero in "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" and "Ulysses" with a perception, sympathy, and occasional impatience that seemed to come from firsthand experience. Blackmur already allured by the Adamses and Henry James.

He could talk, George said (and so did everyone else) about anything, and at any length, in his low measured voice, as though the intricacy of the subject amused him—about neap tides in Maine, the mating mores of grasshoppers, Rabelais, and the Rabelaisian functions of the human body. He talked slowly, rolling the syllables like lozenges, examining the ramifications of the subject as he went, opening avenues and associations (no wonder he loved Coleridge). Not at all like Lincoln's rapid-fire delivery of unquestionable opinions and final judgments. But Blackmur, inbred New Englander though he was, was an oddity in the world of Harvard, and evidently was so regarded by the regular and the regularly aspiring academic community. Some of that regard must have haunted him then and complicated his feelings about his role as an outsider. There was no doubt something unmistakably patronizing in the manner of the Harvard establishment and its devotees including perhaps Lincoln himself, and I could sense it at moments in George's references to the Blackmur of those days: a flicker of wondering amusement. Clearly he had thought of Blackmur as a phenomenon impossible to emulate, and yet he had considered Blackmur's cranky independence, his intransigent but respectful position outside the establishment, as altogether exemplary. I realized then and later that his early friendship with Blackmur must have helped him to decide

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that my own way of living was more or less comprehensible. He did, in fact, have a genuine and deep regard for what he took to be independence, and he admired what seemed to him indifference to wealth, possessions, status, and general opinion. But at the same time he welcomed a precedent. Everyone does. For George it had particular importance. He was, as I came to realize, in most of the immediate aspects of his own life, a very conventional man.

We talked of sailing—the literature of it. Conrad, Eliot writing of the coast of Maine, Blackmur and the lobster fishermen, and of more practical plans. He was excited about the summer ahead, a youthful excitement. The excitement is still there in the letter he wrote about meeting in June, to sail from Mamaroneck up the New England coast. After reassurances about nothing much being needed by way of clothes, he said:

> I will meet the 12:44 at Stamford on Friday . . . My rough plan, after spending an evening with chart and dividers, is to meander in a desultory way towards the Cape Cod Canal entrance, reaching it on Wednesday or Thursday. Then we will sail across the Gulf of Maine directly from the Canal entrance to Monhegan Island . . . Sea-gull Local #463 of Mamaroneck has been communicated with and they intend to alert Monhegan Local #436 of the arrival. The idea of this is to give the little men with the fog machines plenty of time to get down on the points and do their stuff. I can practically hear them now, saying, 'It's all right for volume, Jake, but we gotta put more yellow in it.' It's always fun to aim for Monhegan and wonder what in the world you will hit. Be assured we will hit something, though, as it is almost impossible to miss the coast of Maine.

Several of my literary friends in Boston who knew something of its rumors about Lincoln, Mina, and George, threw up their hands at the idea of such a venture, especially in such company. None of the people I knew was acquainted with any of the Kirsteins first hand, but evidently there were orthodox views about them, based upon unimpeachable prejudice. The angularities of Mina's and Lincoln's behavior were generally known and had become more or less canonical, because Mina

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Lincoln, as everyone agreed, were interesting. George, on the other hand, was referred to as though he were still the muddy young man who had burst, in such a rage, upon Mina's tea party.

That clear sunny afternoon just past mid-summer was the first time that I had actually set foot in the commuter land of Connecticut and Westchester County—those household words. George and a woman friend of his picked me up out of the emerging throng of weekenders and drove me past the colonial-style entrances and tended lawns to the old Boston Post Road, and Mamaroneck, which (after years in Europe) I was startled to hear referred to as a village. Taylor's Lane turned abruptly from among the diners and filling stations, dipped at once among the tall reeds of a marsh, and climbed into the woods beyond it. In there, George told me, was hidden the old house where Ethel Barrymore had lived. The sunlight dappled the green undergrowth as though it were still spring in those woods that must have been allowed to return after the first and no doubt the second growth had been cut off, before the present century. Another quarter of a mile or so and the sheen of water appeared on our left. The mill pond, George told me, which extended all the way to Rye (wherever that might be). A short causeway led out into the still water, to a small island topped with a house that looked as though it belonged in a movie. That was Believe-It-Or-Not Ripley's, or it had been. Empty now. Beyond the mill pond, the open water of the sound, and on the horizon, in the flattering distance, Long Island. We passed one very beautiful big old plain farmhouse, belonging to another neighbor and close friend of George's, slipped through a gate under big trees, and stopped at the back of George's house, at the end of the mill pond, where the long stone dam crossed the mill race. George's house had been the mill.

During his last years George wrote a history of it, which turned into a small history of the community. The mill, which had operated most profitably as a pumice mill, was very old. It was also exceedingly plain. Its plainness, in fact, was its only real elegance. A box, of no particular proportions, with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smaller box tacked on one side across the mill race. There was no special grace in either the building itself or the windows set into it around two stories. The clapboard painted white, the shutters red.

But the front of the house faced onto several acres of grass and old apple orchard, and to one side of the open green was a low sea-wall. Beyond that, a narrow rocky cove opened into the sound, brushed by sails in the distance. The miles of mill-pond behind it, the mill-race flowing under one end of it as the tides changed, the inlet and the Sound in front of it—obviously the person who chose such a place was someone who wanted to be near water. The house, as I came to know it, revealed other things about its owner.

Anything about the interior that might have showed that it had once been a mill had long since gone. The house had been thoroughly domesticated, and remodelled several times. It had once belonged to Ezio Pinza, and as I recall it had afterwards passed into the hands of a man who had eventually killed himself there, in the downstairs sitting room where George sat and read in the evenings at home. One of George's superstitions was that he had none. I think he said that it was Pinza who had the place done over so thoroughly, changing the way the rooms were laid out, boxing in the old ceiling beams with pine. On the ground floor there was a big entrance hall with wide wooden stairs, and off to the right the sitting room over the sea wall, with its field-stone fireplace; on the other side the guest bedroom (one of three—everything panelled in the same kind of pine).

The long living room upstairs, looking out over the sound, and the dining room overlooking the full length of the mill-pond, made a single long, light, spacious room. Everywhere the furniture was comfortable, commodious, and dull. It brought something of the department store with it. There were few signs of a woman's attention. George's marriage had ended some years before he acquired The Old Mill, and his women friends after that had had little influence on the house. The nautical motif was rather heavy. Clocks set in brass capstan wheels, that rang the hours in ships' bells. Ship pat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

terns on the bedspreads and curtains, on the plates at the table, and the lampshades. The real distinction, apart from the light, the space, and the views of water, may have meant little to those guests of George's who were not addicted to maritime art: there was a fine series of Japanese prints of ships (gifts, I think, from Lincoln) on the stairs, and in the main rooms a number of large ship models, some of considerable age, including a few remarkable wooden bas-reliefs of ships on carved and painted seas, which had been presents from Mina.

Out in the offing, at the mouth of the inlet, George's thirty-eight-foot yawl, *Skylark*, rode at her mooring. George had acquired *Skylark* soon after the war, and she had not been sailing for more than a few years, but for some reason she was referred to familiarly or fondly as though she were much older, a kind of heirloom. It may have had something to do with the old standards of craftsmanship with which she had been built—vintage work, from before the war. Certainly it conveyed some of the affection, and perhaps some sense of vulnerability, that George felt for her.

We loaded the luggage, and the groceries for the next few days, into a tender, and ferried them out to *Skylark* and settled in. George's friend who had come with him to the station pushed off in the boat. The Sound was still as we stowed things away for the trip, but by the time we had finished a breeze had sprung up. It was not the northwester that had been promised by the weather forecasters, with blue skies and bright sun. Instead, it was swinging in from points farther south, and there were mats of low overcast above the island in the distance, but it was a good breeze nevertheless, and fair weather had been prophesied. In the latter part of the afternoon we slipped the mooring and made sail from Mamaroneck, heading for a small harbor on the Long Island shore that George called the Sand Spit.

I could see why he liked the place as we approached, in the long mid-summer evening light. An arm of sand bar enclosed a deep narrow basin of calm water, a kind of curving lagoon surrounded by rather steeply shelving beaches. Only one other boat was there as we made our way in through the channel and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dropped anchor, but as we sat in the cockpit having supper one more followed us, and another made it in with the last light. Their portholes glowed for a while, but the little harbor was remarkably quiet.

But early in the night the wind began to pick up, and it rose until the stays were whining. George seemed to be suffering from some kind of digestive disorder and I heard the hand pump in the head gasping and belching, and then doing it again in a while. Each time the accompanying note in the rigging was louder and more shrill, and the motion of the boat swinging at anchor was more pronounced. George was sleeping in the bow, and my bunk was in the central cabin. I saw him slip past several times and go up on deck, cigarette burning. Once I asked whether everything was all right and he grunted.

The wind was howling when I woke at first light, and George was up in the cockpit.

"What a night," he said. He pointed to two of the other boats that had dragged their anchors and were almost up on the beach. He had come up on deck in the night to check, and had let out more anchor cable. One of the other boats had nearly collided with us in the dark. Our own anchor had held better than theirs, and we were swinging on the long cable. We had some breakfast, standing in the wind, and listened to the marine forecast. There had been a little surprise for the weather people. A hurricane had been moving along the New England coast, laying about itself as it went, but that had been a few days earlier, and the storm, according to the meteorologists, had blown out to sea and away. But apparently it was not so. There had been an atmospheric change of mind. The promised northwester had not come in strongly enough, or something unforeseen had happened, and the storm had come back, thumping against the coast, not invading it, but obviously not ready to leave. The wind that had been howling most of the night was as loud as ever. Outside the channel, beyond the sand bar, we could see surf breaking almost over the bar. All sorts of small craft warnings were in effect. We were not exactly a small craft, and George thought the wind

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would probably drop a little after sunrise. We could put out the other anchor and stay where we were, or we could get out of there, which George decided to do.

When breakfast was put away we broke out a jib, and George started the engine. We eased up on the anchor and hauled it aboard, and then headed out through the channel into the surf. *Skylark* climbed over the breakers like a dory, and we made it, wet and well shaken down, and there we were, out in the whipped, gusty, uncertain temper of the Sound, a very different place from the one we had crossed in the evening light. We seemed to be the only boat out there. But in fact, outside the breakers the waves were not particularly high. The sky was blue, and the sun was bright on the blown spray. We headed east up the Sound under full sail, running before the wind, listening to the marine operator, and occasional accounts of boats in trouble, vessels dismasted. But the wind seemed fairly steady and we kept a good distance from all charted navigational hazards, and after a while as we boiled along and the morning warmed up, it all began to seem normal. George not only left me at the wheel but went below and busied himself stowing things and studying the chart.

I must have been up there alone for a couple of hours in the sun and wind and I began to realize that I had not had much sleep the night before. My eyes were beginning to sting with the glare and the constant fine blowing spray. Far ahead of us, in the haze that hid the horizon, I could make out something that appeared to be a vessel, but its shape looked very improbable. I watched it through the binoculars, but I could see no hull, down in the haze. There appeared to be three masts, moving together. But, as the image grew, they looked like square-rigged masts, there were yard-arms. And they were moving into the wind, without a stitch of canvas that I could see. A little closer, and the image was definitely that of a square-rigger, and a very old-fashioned one at that. I began to run over what I remembered of the story of the Flying Dutchman. Finally I called George, with some hesitation, because it sounded a little unlikely.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There's something strange heading this way."

"Yes."

"A square-rigged vessel."

"Yeah."

"Looks very old. A brig, maybe. Or even some kind of galleon."

"A what?"

"Galleon."

"Yeah."

"Coming straight for us. Into the wind. With no sails up."

"What were you drinking last night?"

He appeared in the companionway and said, "You ought to wear sunglasses in this glare."

"You look."

He took the glasses and looked where I pointed, and then went on looking for a long time. Then he started to laugh, and handed the glasses back.

What the haze had hidden from me until then was the tug, far in advance of the apparition, towing it. The vision itself, as it came closer, turned out to be the *Mayflower*—the replica, that is—being towed to New York after its much-publicized voyage across the Atlantic. Slowly she disappeared behind us, bucking and rolling as she went, and back there, as she vanished, heavy clouds were beginning to build. By the time we nosed our way, in mid-afternoon, among the rock islands of a small archipelago named The Needles, off the Connecticut coast, the wind had shifted south and had begun to lash us with heavy rain.

George and, as I recall it, the marine operator, assured us that the wind would drop after sunset. But in fact it rose higher, and then higher, and the rain sluiced across the portholes all night. By morning the sky was clearing but the wind was as rough as ever and the waves were higher. We broke out the anchor in the last of the rain and headed on up the coast. By late afternoon the Sound was quiet and smooth and we slipped into a harbor like a mirror on the island of Cuttyhunk, and spent the evening talking and reading, chatting with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

geese that came cruising out to us looking for hand-outs. The island was bathed in golden mid-summer light, and the storm had gone at last—we thought.

But next morning the wind was back, and our exit from Cuttyhunk was not quite as wild a ride as the departure from the Sand Spit, but the swell out in the Sound was high. And so it went, on up the coast, to Marion, Massachusetts, and then the Cape Cod Canal: bright, clear, sunny days, whipped by winds, with dark clouds haunting the southern horizon, and occasional squalls of lashing rain. We chugged through the canal, with terns wheeling and diving around us, and emerged at the northern end in late afternoon. George decided to make a night run across the gulf of Maine, heading for Monhegan Island. Even though, he said, the wind would probably drop completely, after sunset, and we might have to motor a good part of the way.

But as Cape Cod receded behind us, the wind really began to get serious, hitting us from the southwest, with occasional gusts from the southeast. The daylight faded; we lost sight of the shore, and the clouds along the southern horizon darkened and rose over us. Out of the lee of the Cape, the sea turned mean, and flung us from one wave to crash into the next one. We learned—too late to do much about it—that the hurricane that supposedly had died out several days earlier had still not left the coast, and the winds of the past few days had been small rearguard actions that it had set up to give us the idea of what we had missed. But what was now overtaking us was a freak return—not, fortunately, of the full force of the hurricane, but of its death-throes.

They were quite impressive enough. Huge waves, from several quarters astern, broke clear over the cockpit. The wind became increasingly erratic, with heavy gusts followed by moments that seemed airless. We shortened sail—George shortened sail, while I stayed at the wheel—and so the night lurched on. In the center of it was the binnacle light, and under it the compass card dancing like a kite. If whichever of us was not at the wheel lay down on the bench in the cockpit, it would only be a moment before a wave broke over us, or a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

violent roll pitched him off onto the deck. We hurtled forward as though falling downstairs, and struck the troughs between waves as though they were floors. When I was at the wheel there were sickening instants when I thought that the compass card has spun ninety degrees and more, and that we were out of control and about to be swamped broadside. In a moment when we could hear each other I asked George whether it was always like this when the wind dropped.

It did, in fact, drop a little, shortly before sunrise. I was at the wheel again as the first light began to seep into the sky. The swells seemed as high and heavy as ever, but imperceptibly they had grown more regular, and so had the wind, which lightened steadily with the approach of dawn. As the gray sea became visible I saw a trawler not far ahead of us, heading out to sea. Our courses looked to me too convergent for comfort and I called George, who had gone below by then, to tell him.

"Ram the bastard," George called back. "He'll soon learn." Evidently he too thought that the storm was past. A moment later he appeared in the companionway looking noticeably older than the day before.

"Jesus, your eyes look red," he said. He stood in the companionway looking slowly around the horizon, and then, after pointing out the direction in which I should expect the first glimpse of Monhegan Island, he turned in for a nap. An hour or so later, when my watch was about finished, he peered up out of the cabin again and asked, "Seen Monhegan yet?"

I could see nothing in the direction I had been watching, except waves and the blue sky.

"Not yet," I said.

"Funny," he said. "It's nine o'clock. We should have seen Monhegan by now."

He came on up, reached for the glasses, turned toward the bow. Before even raising the glasses, he said, "There's Monhegan. Right there."

"Can't see a thing," I said. My eyes were so tired that it was a long moment before I could make out the shape of the steep island, which under ordinary circumstances would already have been visible for most of an hour. We had breakfast in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cockpit, sailing past under the gray cliffs and the lighthouse, and on to Tennant's Harbor, a quite anchorage among a few lobster boats, and sleep.

By the time we were ready to wash up and wander around the few streets of Tennant's Harbor, a low overcast had drifted in from the sea, and a light rain was falling. We clambered onto the wharf, watching two men in the lobster boats unloading their catch, and walked on up into the town, telling each other what we knew about lobstering and the lives of lobstermen, Blackmur's poems about lobstering, and the progressive overfishing and destruction of marine flora and fauna along the Atlantic coast by new techniques bent to familiar motives. The streets were empty. Frame houses tucked behind lilac bushes, under old trees. Lace curtains drawn all the way across the ground floor windows. On our way to the main street to buy a paper, George told me that on that day a woman who had been his companion for several years, and from whom he had separated a year or so before, was getting married. He said very little about it. As I remember, she had wanted to marry George, but she had wanted marriage more than he had, and they had parted as a result. I learned a little more about his private life—he spoke of his marriage that had come apart while he was away in the South Pacific during WWII—but only a little, and it was clear that George was not prone to talking about such things.

But by the end of the trip, or my part of it, a few days later, I had a fairly clear, if still very sketchy, notion of the nature of George's history with women, from his college days on. He liked the company of women, but his manner with women in general was rather old-fashioned: courtly, and likely to be unconsciously patronizing. His views were conventionally sexist, far more than he would have admitted. I found it troubling, and more so as I came to know him better and could see that the fixed attitude that was there in most of his dealings with women was inseparably tangled with his own emotional inhibitions, his profound difficulty in expressing, returning, or even tolerating open displays of affection with women with whom he was involved. As we walked through the streets of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tennant's Harbor I saw that what I had at first supposed to be a simple fatigue was also depression: the thought of the wedding, and its place in his own story, moving in upon the day and wakening his own ignored, suppressed, conflicting feelings, his regrets and complex resentments.

The remainder of the trip had its small events. Rocks draped in basking seals. The beauty of the coast, the rock islands and the stands of forest. The birds. George liked to listen to the ball game, mid-afternoon. I am so without interest in organized sports that I usually do not even know what kind of game is being referred to, and the elaborately excited nasal gabble of the sports commentator seemed a terrible intrusion upon the quiet of the coast, the shushing of the waves, the voices of birds and seals. It brought back a world of barber shops. If I was not at the wheel, usually I went up forward of the mast, with a book and a pair of binoculars. But by the end of the trip I had learned something, not about baseball, but about the temperamental ways of Ted Williams, and his effects on his detractors and admirers. I even suspect that George himself was as captivated by Ted Williams' behavior as he was by the game itself. It was certainly what he returned to, when the game was over.

And we talked more about political matters, events in the news and what they seemed to portend, than I had ever done with anyone. During my years in Europe I had followed the news, much of the time, rather vaguely, and my reading of newspapers in general has always been erratic, depending on what has been going on. But I had come back to the States with an appetite for the life of the place, and I had begun to read not only a couple of national papers and *The Nation*, but some of the local sheets. (There was one tabloid called the *Mid-Town Journal* that I used to pick up, not just for the lurid items that purported to be news and were so obviously retouched in the telling as to sound utterly unreal, but for the rococo flourishes of its peculiar journalistic style, which went in for such heavy alliteration that it blurred what meaning remained, as the music fogs the words of a libretto. The content of this crusading sheet eddied around the nefarious doings of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the metropolitan area, and focused, with lubricious righteousness, on the functionings of the underworld. I forget whether it was published weekly or twice a week—the issues tended to be rather repetitious. A single headline remains with me intact. No number of the paper was complete without its account of a raid on a house of ill-repute, and the regular rhetoricians must have been taxed to find new ways to announce the latest triumph of decency. This one, in large letters, trumpeted, "Bags Brothel Boss And Babes.")

The ruminations with George about what was happening in the country and in the world became a single conversation that we fell into, at the beginning, as something already familiar, and resumed over the years as though it had never been interrupted. The tenor of it was frequently somber and seldom optimistic, but it was pierced by George's vein of black humor. It was a quirky gift, delighting in outrageous twists and exaggerations, sometimes plain silly, adolescent, downright atrocious, but there were times when George seemed one of the funniest people I had known.

By the time I left George, and *Skylark*, in Camden harbor, where my place was taken by an old friend of George's, a fellow-officer on a troop ship in the South Pacific in World War II, the conversation, its tone, and I suppose its limitations, had come to be taken for granted. Such things often do not survive the circumstances that brought them about. In this case the running dialogue was the staple of a friendship that survived many changes in both of our lives. As for *Skylark*, when she was put into drydock at the end of the season, it turned out that an impressive number of her oak ribs had been cracked in that night crossing of the Gulf of Maine.

The trip itself, of course, became part of the family fund of allusion, and some of the conversation and some of its tone passed into the correspondence that really began after that sail was over. The last time I saw George, almost thirty years later, he handed me—I realized that he felt some urgency to do so—a box containing the whole of the correspondence between us. I winced as I looked through my own letters, the earlier ones in particular. There was, to begin with, the usual

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shock at hearing one's own voice. But worse than that was the bumptious manner, the current of facetious banter incorporating snatches of imitations, affectations, adolescent inanity. It was easy enough, even after three decades, to recognize the sources of some of the imitations. "Chum," as a form of address, I had picked up from Berryman, who clearly had picked it up from somewhere else. I was a little surprised at it all, even though I knew that those letters were full of family monkeyshines that would be embarrassing to reread. But the brashness on the one hand, and the ponderous and marble jaws on the other, were unpleasant to rediscover in all their indelibility. It was the adolescent quality that was as startling as anything else, for in fact I was in my thirties already when the earliest of those letters were written. I am sure that I was, in fact, far less mature at the time than I liked to believe. The correspondence and the friendship allowed me to reveal some of the nonsense that was usually more soberly attired. Later I imagined, as we do, that having finally outgrown things they disappeared. In any case, the embarrassment itself at the rediscovery is really vain and foolish, a clinging to an image on a bubble.

I suspect that the adolescent tone is an indication of something else that friends of George suggested to me, over the years: he became, from the beginning, a paternal figure for me, and acted toward me in some ways as a parent for the rest of his life, though both of us would have shied away from putting it that way. When my wife read the letters recently she suggested that George had suddenly come to represent for me the parent with whom, long after childhood, I had a good time, and that as a response I regressed happily to the showing-off and the antics of adolescence, out of high spirits and a feeling of liberation. I was also presenting what I took to be a sympathetic imitation of George's own humor, which was not above a certain undergraduate turn. The letters are relaxed and imprudent, and yet it is remarkable, on looking through them and recalling the years they evoke, to notice how much was never mentioned in them, or was mentioned only in passing, or long after the fact.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Things, for instance, having to do with what would be termed our private lives, particularly emotional attachments with other people. When I began to read through the letters I was struck by what was unmistakably affection. It was not openly expressed, heaven knows—George signed his letters "Yours." My own silly banter was one of the manifestations of the affection, and the very promptness and attentiveness of George's letters, particularly during the sixties, was another. But though the letters display an obvious confidence in many shared interests, enthusiasms, dislikes, they are not really intimate. Which is something else they share with a certain sort of parental relation—the sort that I was used to, and from all I know the sort that George had known. It would never have occurred to me to speak to either of my parents about girls, my feelings about them, or anything that happened with them. I assumed that they assumed that such things did not exist at all, or existed only as distant surreptitious interests that would be embarrassing if named. It would have been unthinkable to raise such a subject with my own father when I was growing up. And with my mother—once when I was about sixteen, I think, she asked me solemnly never to do anything I could not tell her about, and then told me that she trusted me. So when opportunities arose, they were far from home and never divulged.

And George spoke to me occasionally, with evident approval, of certain relationships of his own, relatively close associations centered around work, or business, or some interest such as sailing, that he had had for years with individuals about whose private lives he knew nothing at all. He was repelled by public displays of affection of any kind. The surprising thing, it might seem, is that there is as much personal warmth in the letters as there is. But of course George was not as remote or forbidding as he pretended to be, even in his last years when he had withdrawn until his old friends found it hard to talk with him about any personal matters at all. The real warmth of his nature had been deeply suppressed very early, but it had survived, along with a mordant wit and a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rather louring charm, and it was why George had friends around him who were fond of him until he died.

No doubt the accepted exclusion of emotional intimacy, or of reference to certain emotions, (for indignation, straight or burlesque, and other feelings about public events, and admiration of natural or artistic phenomena were permissible) led to awkwardness, as it had led to remoteness from parents, and it helped to turn the facetious exchanges, as time went on, into the twitches of a mannerism. The impulse to greater candor that was natural in the situation was frustrated, and emerged, if it did at all, stunted and distorted beyond recognition. About personal matters, the letters are stiffer than our conversations were. It was obviously even harder to write back and forth about such things than it was to talk about them.

And of course the letters cover only the periods when George and I were some distance apart, often with an ocean between us. But during those years I spent a great deal of the time—more than half of most years—abroad. Soon after the first cruise on *Skylark* I returned to Europe, grudgingly. My English wife, to whom I was then married, had been away from England and her London house for longer then she wanted to be. She evoked her aging mother. The marriage itself was hopeless, and the return was a death blow to it, but I was not yet ready to admit as much to myself. It would be years before I could discuss the matter with anyone. That sort of thing had never been mentioned in my family either, though my parents stared out of opposite windows. Divorces were things that simply did not happen among people we knew, and my father always refused, as a minister, to marry anyone who had been divorced. There is no allusion to the unraveling current of my marital situation in the letters. Instead, there are dutiful references to the health, opinions, and activities of the woman to whom I would remain legally married for some years to come.

As for George's own life of the heart, he said, at the time of that first cruise on *Skylark*, that Miss Right was probably one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the seals who lay sunning on the rocks or swam close to the boat to gaze up out of the water. It was those huge soulful eyes, he said, that he would not be able to resist. Miss Right's name was Phoebe. All seals were named Phoebe. After I left *Skylark* George wrote to me that he had met Miss Right just outside of a herring net and that they had conversed for "virtually an entire afternoon, and she explained to me the difficulties of breaking down fish weirs."

Soon after the trip, though, he met Jane Cianfarra at one of the parties which he so seldom attended. Jane was beautiful, gentle, and tragic. She had been married to a *New York Times* correspondent in Rome and had been returning with her husband and two children on the *Andrea Doria*. The prow of the *Stockholm* struck the *Andrea Doria* at night in the fog knifing directly into their cabin, cutting it in half. She had never seen her husband or infant again, and her small daughter had been found unconscious the following morning on the bow of the Swedish vessel. She had fallen there at the moment of impact. Jane herself had been pinned under wreckage, with both legs broken, and was rescued by an Italian steward.

Jane's fragility, for George, was one of her endless attractions, and he paid court to her with a certain awe and no great hope of success. But the courtship did continue, and he even managed to entice her out sailing with him briefly before *Skylark* was taken out of the water for the winter. The attention, and perhaps even the sailing, may have been just what she needed, and Jane accepted the proposal that George had wanted to make from the start. They were married that same autumn, and Jane seemed to settle at once into The Old Mill. For someone scarred she was very easy to be with, and George was completely devoted to her.

Before Christmas he wrote, "Jane wanted to send you a candle which we saw in a hardware store about four-and-a-half feet tall and two feet in diameter, which had been marked down and was for use on the lawns of factory buildings to show that they welcomed Christmas. I put my foot down, though,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

having seen your apartment, because you wouldn't have been able to get it in." The day after New Year's he wrote, "We went by the store again the day after Christmas and the candle is only $2.95 now. Seems very reasonable, and if you only add the $25 express charges, it seemed to Jane a real bargain."

We had booked passage on the *Flandres* for Plymouth, England, the following March. "We are both very sorry to be going," I wrote to George a couple of weeks before the move, "naturally in somewhat different ways." Jane helped to shepherd our assorted trunks and gypsy baggage through on their way from Boston to the pier.

She and George were about to leave for England too, and they got there not long after our own return to a cold London spring. George, Jane, and I spent a few delightful days driving through southwest England—Bath, and Cornwall. We arrived at Stonehenge on the day they raised the first of the fallen stones. George bought every book he could find on the subject and seemed to have read them all by dinner time. He was a happy man.

That year I was in Europe all summer and George and Jane sailed, mostly by themselves. Despite the catastrophe in her history Jane turned out to be an enthusiastic and extremely capable sailor—except for fogs. George's letters were full of incidents of their summer sailing far up—or far down—the coast of Maine. During those months I was gradually but steadily captivated by the half-ruined farmhouse in France that I had bought four years earlier with a tiny legacy that I had been left by a maiden aunt, and my own letters were full of details of the place. And we wrote to each other about pieces for *The Nation*, and about the events in the papers, with which George, as always, was better acquainted that I was.

I did not get back to New York until the autumn of 1960, but I saw George and Jane on other visits of theirs to Europe. Then for several years I contrived to spend the winters in New York, living on the Lower East Side, much of the time on my own. George, of course, found the location, the address, the apartments, unimaginable, but accepted them with the fond

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tolerance with which a parent might indulge an incorrigible child. Like much of the rest of my life, they were consigned to the category of bohemian eccentricity, crazy but inevitable.

He felt he had to make similar accomodations for my clothes. His own were altogether conventional and mine were often less formal than he thought the circumstances warranted. On one trip in Europe together he fussed almost every evening because I had brought no sport jacket but only a knitted cardigan, and he was worried that the country restaurants might not admit us. From time to time I was lent a tie. In time he repeated with relish the tale of our walking down Madison or Lexington, in New York, at around three one afternoon and going into a series of almost empty restaurants where we were told they could not seat us. He claimed it was my jacket (I was wearing a tie that day). I suggested that the hour might have had something to do with it, but he preferred his own explanation, which forced us, he insisted, to have a very bad lunch in the end.

Poetry itself, much of it, slipped into the inexplicably eccentric category at times. His way of speaking of some of it survives, for instance, in a paragraph about St. John Perse:

> Everyone here in literary circles says that my sister's friend Leger is the greatest poet since the greatest poet. As you probably know, his *Seamarks* has just been published. I like the sea, Bill, and the title had the sea in it, so I tried to read it. I feel like one of the fools who don't think *Hamlet* is a great play, but in the quietest possible voice, as I hide my head in a comic book—which I can understand—I have to confess that I don't like *Seamarks* very much. Indeed, I think the children who tell you about their really imaginative images are somewhat more interesting and even more exciting. Anyway, *Time* magazine agrees with Mina and I believe even the reviewer who is reviewing the book for *The Nation* says it is great. I have a little difficulty with the reviewer too, but perhaps you can explain it to me when you see it.

The tone persisted when George and Jane and I went to the theater together, which we did about once a week when I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in New York by myself. Pinter, whose plays Jane and I loved, drove George into flights of eloquent incomprehension. And Genet. "I had a little difficulty at *The Balcony* by Genet," he wrote, "which Jane and I saw the other night. It's a play about a whorehouse and there's a bishop and a general and a judge in it, except they are not really bishops, generals, or judges. They are shoe salesmen, railway clerks and fish peddlers who dress up like other people for kicks. We got that far pretty well which was the first act but then—the second act. It seems that they really turned into bishops, generals and judges and coffins keep coming in the doors on the corners. Jane thought it was symbolic of the triumph of Franco in Spain. I thought it showed the tough financial plight of whorehouses. You see, there is a wide range of interpretation that can be put on Genet's work but right in the second act the range of interpretation narrowed as the audience got smaller and smaller. Each pair of eyes saw a different thing but there were fewer and fewer eyes and finally I could see nothing."

My barely surviving marriage apparently was entered in the category of artistic eccentricity, along with my apartments and clothes. He referred to it, when he did at all, as though it were quite what he would have expected. But then the whole subject of marriage was one that he had dismissed years earlier, deciding that it was on the whole a terrible institution—except for his being married to Jane.

I loved living on the Lower East Side. But the farmhouse in France, the small village, the open countryside, drew me back—I missed them when I was not there. And I missed New York when I was in France, and there was no solution. When I was away, George wrote to me with admiration about the beginnings of the black civil rights movement:

> The truth is, that an entirely new spirit has come over the young in this country even during the last year or so. [The date of the letter was April 27, 1960.] The most refreshing evidence of it is the sympathetic picketing which is going on in virtually every college in America to support the Negro cafeteria sit-down students who are struggling for equality in the South. The Negro

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> students themselves are taking the leadership and I can assure you that they are anything but soft. They are being jailed, fined, beaten, harassed and generally made as miserable as possible.

Their actions led him to reflect on the new generation altogether. "Personally, I think that a generation which has led the world through a depression and the worst war in history and up to the brink of another one should retire gracefully and soon."

I had already become involved in the peace movement in England and had written about the third Aldermaston march for *The Nation*. Back in the States, I edited the poetry for *The Nation* for a while in 1961 and continued to write articles about anti-nuclear protest for *The Nation*, and then a long piece for *The New Yorker* about the "Everyman" demonstration in San Francisco in the spring of 1962. *The New Yorker* was inching cautiously toward political comment. Their first real coverage of the growing black movement had been James Baldwin's superb *The Fire Next Time*, and the "Everyman" essay was to be the first writing they would publish on the anti-nuclear movement. It was set up, the galleys were corrected, and less than a week before it was scheduled to appear, the Cuban missile crisis was announced. Immediately *The New Yorker* killed it. I was told that at such a time it would be inappropriate. I called George to tell him and he said, "We'll give you the Christmas issue."

Living in downtown Manhattan, the reverberations of the Cuban missile crisis seemed to become part of the neglected architecture itself. On the street corners and in the bars I heard the usual louts and loud-mouths declaring that "we should have dropped the bomb on them long ago." Literary friends who described themselves as liberals insisted that Jack had done a fine and essential thing. Others who had always made a point of taking no interest in "politics" called up at odd hours to ask whether I thought we would be bombed. I began to be pursued by the thought that if, in all this madhouse, someone were to ask me what I thought would be a good way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to live, I would not have a very clear answer, and it seemed to me that it was time to try to find one. The farm in France, of which I had grown inordinately fond, appeared to me more than ever to be a piece of great good fortune. I realized that I did not know how to grow a single thing that I ate every day, and I decided to go back there and try to learn to grow food in the garden—something which all my peasant neighbors knew how to do.

The decision coincided with George's beginning to talk of leaving *The Nation*. I have a clear, obscurely uncomfortable image of his first raising the subject. He and Jane and I had stayed late at *The Nation* which was then down on Sixth Avenue below Fourth Street. We were in George's car, and had performed some errand of Jane's, I believe, in the Village, and we were driving on the short block of Tenth Street, east of Greenwich Avenue, past the Jefferson Library. We stopped at the red light and as it turned green and we swung left to head uptown, George announced that he thought it was time for him to sell *The Nation*. The car was full of tobacco smoke. I remember how the back of the car seat looked, and the Ansonia Pharmacy and the laundry as we passed. George said he had had the magazine for ten years and that was enough. He said he hated being in the city, the filth, the violence, the racket. He said he would be quite happy sailing in the summer and reading the complete works of Jefferson, and maybe writing a book.

He did not sell the magazine at once. But the subject returned in his letters that summer and in the months that followed. In fact it was more than three years after that before he sold *The Nation*. And his letters about the American scene remained as intent and unawed as ever. He wrote with a familiar distaste of the brew-up for the 1964 presidential election, in letter after letter, and with only a few days to go, he summed up his views of the spectacle:

> This country is performing its quadrennial ballet about the forthcoming election. The somewhat irreverent Episcopal Bishop of Washington last week said, from his pulpit, that the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> American people were confronted with a ghastly choice. They could either elect a man so stupid that he endangered not only the peace of the nation but whatever domestic tranquility survived through our current tensions, or we could select a crook whose ethics were so appalling that on an annual salary which had never exceeded $25,000 a year, he was able to amass a $10,000,000 fortune. That bad Bishop was referring to none other than Lyndon B. Johnson who is my candidate for the presidency . . .

The following spring we traveled again in Europe. George had suggested an "Ajax box-top trip" with himself as Ajax the host, and he wanted to be told where to go. So he and Jane came to the farm at Lacan, with a rented station wagon, and from there we drove through the Gorges du Tarn to Provence: Nimes, Arles, Avignon, Aix, Les Baux, La Camargues. George's inhibitions about poetry and contemporary writing extended to French food. We stopped together for a picnic ("You pick it out") and the market of Aix offered up the treasures of the south to fill our filets. When the contents were spread on the grass outside the bird sanctuary on La Camargue, George sampled a shaving of this and a taste of that, and finally siezed upon a liver sausage and moved it over beside him protectively. "I don't think you'd like it," he said, as he spread it lavishly on his bread. He said it was kind of like liverwurst.

From France we loaded ourselves onto the boat to Corsica, a rough night passage that kept Jane awake and unhappy; and then we drove around Corsica for days. Jane was delighted to be back in southern Europe again. Everyone was. George kept saying that it was something that he would never have done on his own, and that it was the first time he had liked France. The landscape, the wine, the meals, the wedding party to which we were invited (and where they got us, George included, to sing "Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes"), started him talking about his brother and sister, until the laughing became dangerous on the winding mountain roads. As for Ajax, George insisted afterwards that it had not cost him a cent. One outing on the way back had taken care of the whole thing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We took off, as you recall, in a lovely drunken haze of good feeling about our successful cruise in Corsica, and landed in Nice soon afterward. Jane could only think of the Negresco, so we proceeded to what must be the world's lushest hotel. There were green velvet spreads on the bed and red satin on the walls, crystal chandeliers and Jeezel it wasn't like what we had been staying in at Corsica at all. After a few more drinks, we proceeded to the municipal casino where there was a game going on with a roulette wheel and with the green cloth with numbers on it which I have seen in casinos. Other than the fact that the tools of the trade seemed to be the same, I was unable to gather any similarity between this game and others I have played at various pleasure spots. I put my little money on the number zero a number of times in order to find out what the game was like. The little white ball fell in the zero on the wheel three times in succession and people shoveled great wads of francs at me. At this point I explained to Jane that I didn't know this game, and we left. The following day we took what must be the world's most endless airplane journey back to the States."

By the latter part of that year (1965), in preparation for selling *The Nation* to James Storrow and retiring, George started to gather material for his book on "The Rich":

> I have not had a great deal of time to study those rich with the intensity that I would like. I have, however, begun compiling the clips of their more outstanding suicides which occur at least once a month. The most recent was the heir to the Heinz money who said in his farewell letter, 'there is no place for me here . . . ' I'm kind of philosophical, you see, and the book is going to be kind of philosophical too. It's going to have weight and substance and it's going to be thoughtful. It's going to be controversial too and by the time I'm finished with it I'll be thoroughly ashamed of it. But it will sell like mad. It's that same awful story of the three successive zeros at the roulette table at Nice.

The sale of *The Nation* was announced at the beginning of 1966. The *Times* and *Newsweek* wrote what he called "respect-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ful stories" about the magazine and his years there. He admitted that "in a way I am proud of my stay at *The Nation*." Mentioning the press comments on his influence he said, "Maybe I made the sheet part of the establishment, but I would rather think that dissent is a little more acceptable these days due to the lunacy of the actions of the most powerful nation on this or any other earth."

He and Jane spent much of that winter sailing in the Virgin Islands. *Skylark*, now an aging wooden vessel, was not best suited for sailing in the Caribbean, and six months after the sale of *The Nation*, George sold *Skylark* too, and bought, in Maine, a fiberglass Bermuda 40, which he and Jane christened *Shag*. Early in 1966 George's beloved Newfoundland dog Skipper died suddenly. Geoge refused to be "sentimental" about it, but the loss grieved him, and Skipper's death, the parting with *Skylark*, and the sale of *The Nation* must have reflected each other uncomfortably. He continued to work on his book about the rich, and his research filled him with a kind of gruesome hilarity.

He remained convinced that the book would "sell like mad," and his publisher, Houghton Mifflin, shared his optimism. He had some of the same mixed feelings about it that he had about money itself. The book was bound to succeed, he said, simply because of its subject: being rich was something everybody wanted to know about. He was somewhat concerned as to what he would do with the money, which he said he did not want. Give it to Harvard, perhaps. But in fact *The Rich* was scooped, as Houghton Mifflin explained to George, by another book on the same subject whose publisher and author had learned of George's book and hurried to get theirs out first. The earlier book got all the reviews, and when George's came out shortly afterwards, it was largely ignored.

It bothered him, more than he would say, of course, and it dampened whatever ardor he may have had for writing, and discouraged his already shaky faith in his abilities in that direction. And in so doing, it confirmed his lifelong suspicion that Mina and Lincoln's assessment of his talents had been right. He planned other books, or talked of them, but with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no great expectations about their reception anywhere. The one he came to work on most steadily was a modest and rather plodding series of reminiscences of sailing, but he was not even under any illusions about finding a publisher for it.

Since the spring of 1963 I had been living year round at the old farmhouse in southern France, but in the fall of 1966 I returned to New York to be present at the rehearsals of Lorca's *Yerma*, which I had been commissioned to translate for Lincoln Center. With that return I resumed the pattern of spending part of the year in New York and part of it in France. I saw more of George but of course wrote to him less. And there was almost no indication in the letters of the continuing dissolution of my marriage and the disturbances that accompanied it. George knew of other relations of mine, but he seemed to prefer to believe that, odd and remote though the marriage obviously was, it represented something stable in my life, and it was as well for it to remain there. Beyond that he appeared to pay no further attention to it.

Besides, to judge from his letters and the time I spent with them, George was as happy in his own marriage as he was capable of being. In the autumn of 1966 I spent some time with them outfitting the new Bermuda 40, on the Miami River, and taking her out for her shake-down cruise among the Keys, and the time confirmed this sense of their life together.

In the years of my shuttling back and forth between rural France and downtown Manhattan I had invariably spent the summers on the farm, but in 1968 I decided to come to New York for the summer. Carolyn Stoloff offered me her tiny, charming, but very hot, apartment on West Eighth Street in the Village, across from the old Eighth Street Bookstore, and I saw George and Jane fairly regularly when they were in Mamaroneck. That summer I noticed a change in George that disturbed me. His marital contentment seemed unimpaired, but he grumbled and snarled about the young, about the student sit-ins at Columbia, the SDS, the long hair, the middle-class kids who were too spoiled and lazy to work—the "youth," in fact, whom for years he had been urging to dissent, and who at last were dissenting. The change seemed to have come over

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him quite suddenly, in the course of the winter. We argued about it. About George the editor who had followed with empathy the nuclear protests, the black civil rights movement, the first waves of campus unrest, and what had happened to him. I had expected him to rejoice as I did in what seemed to me the long overdue groundswell of youthful recalcitrance. What form did he expect it to take, after all?

I realized as we talked that the change in him was more disturbing than I wanted to believe, and that it represented something that had been happening in George since he gave up *The Nation*, and before—something that had been part of the impulse to give it up. It was an angry rejection of some of the very things that he had professed but with which he was not entirely at ease and did not know why. It was a symptom of old inconsistencies, and of age itself, and of a never assuaged sense of complex betrayals. It made him sound like some of the very people of whom he had spoken, for years, with contempt, and it revealed some of his own mixed feelings about those people and their world. It seemed as we talked that our new and deepening disagreement must be unreal, that it must be some passing impatience and frustration, and that the values he had evoked for so many years would surely restore their perspective. But at the same moment I was aware of an abyss opening between us, across which, if it remained there, it would become harder and harder for us to hear each other.

In July I returned from a few days' visit to my parents in western Pennsylvania. I had driven back, in ten hours, in the secondhand car that I had bought that summer with George's guidance, and I let myself into the hot apartment and called up The Old Mill to let them know I was back, and to talk about the visit. A woman's voice answered the phone, as Jane usually did. It did not sound like Jane, but I heard only "Hello," and asked, "Jane?" It was the German housekeeper, who recognized my voice and said, "Mrs. Kirstein is dead."

She went on at once to explain that Jane had died suddenly in the night, two nights before. Mr. Kirstein had found her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dead in the morning. He had called me but of course I was not in New York, and at the moment he had not been able to lay hands on the number at my parents' house. He had called up his old wartime shipmate in Ohio, and had flown out there a few hours after Jane's body had been taken from the house. I called him there in Ohio and arranged to meet him when he came back.

His upbringing, his lifelong habits, the images on which he had modelled his behavior and his sense of himself, prevented him from being able to express his grief, which must have been the most devastating feeling of which he had ever been aware. I could not leave him alone at The Old Mill, and I virtually moved out there from New York for the first few weeks, and after that spent several days a week there, through the summer. George was stunned and overwhelmed by his loss, and the inability to let out his grief in tears or ceremony or even, for long, in candid talk, was inseparable from a categorical rejection of the possibility of suicide, which for George was a proof of weakness. He spoke about that from time to time, and I could see how his grief, for want of other forms of expression, was taking that of anger, and he did not yet know what he was angry at—at life itself, at himself, at Jane and his love for her which held him helpless. He was angry—and revolted—at the thought of being a figure of grief, an object of pity, or of visiting his own pain upon the company of friends, and he spoke to very few people. But he did go and spend some days with Mina, who he said was sympathetic—he said it as though it surprised him, when indeed the occasion may have been good for Mina.

And then, abruptly, he flung himself into a series of brief sexual relationships, one right after the other, some of them with old friends—and clearly including old friendship—and some with women he had just met. They were of all ages and there seemed to be no similarity of appearance of temperament. He knew more or less what he was doing, and more or less what to think of it. That winter he returned to the Virgin Islands to pack up the house that he and Jane had rented

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there. I joined him at Christmas for a few days. The run of promiscuity led him to several affairs there, one of which, in the early seventies, evolved into a final, brief marriage.

As for my own marriage, a few months after Jane died, my wife and I had agreed to separate—something which indeed did not represent a marked change over the actual situation of the preceding few years, but simply rendered it more or less formal. She had sold her own house in London, and also her mother's apartment there, after her mother died, and she had another farmhouse ten miles from mine in France. She never lived there, but preferred to stay in mine. I returned to the farm in the summers and stayed in another building on the property, as I had done for some time. But my summers in France grew shorter, and I kept a pied-à-terre in New York, in the Village.

And from 1970 until 1973 I went to Mexico in the winters, and lived in San Cristobal de La Casas. In those years George spent almost as much time in the Virgin Islands as in Mamaroneck. He invited me down there sailing regularly, but my life was already complicated enough with travels between New York and France, and New York and Mexico; the years seemed to have been broken into fragments, each too small, and it was hard to welcome the idea of breaking further pieces off any of them.

In 1972 both of my parents died, my father in June, before I was to leave for France, and my mother in September, just as I was about to return. I had left my VW bus (used for the trips to Mexico) out in a garage at George's, and drove back and forth to the house in western Pennsylvania where they had lived, packing things up, disposing of their possessions. Often, coming and going, I spent a day or so in Mamaroneck with George.

The next year, in France, I settled into the empty farmhouse ten miles from my own at Lacan, and late in the summer I was joined there by Moira Hodgson, who had been my friend in New York and Mexico for five years. George, by then, had embarked upon his last marriage, and his new wife, Paulina, wanted to travel in Europe. George suggested being Ajax

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again, as he had been on the trip to Provence and Corsica eight years before. This time the itinerary was in northern Italy: Milan, Padua, Verona, and a week in Venice at the Danieli.

In Padua Pauline had a gallbladder attack, and she was an invalid for the rest of the trip. George insisted on eating as though the carefully chosen dining places were no different from the Italian restaurants on the Boston Post Road in Mamaroneck. Night after night he ordered veal parmigiana with a side order of spaghetti, after several scotches on the rocks, and never touched the wine. And it rained and rained—and we loved being there, and wandered endlessly under umbrellas, with guide books or without them, trying to get lost.

George's marriage survived one appalling Christmas at The Old Mill, and broke up in the course of the following year. George was suitably shamefaced at his own rashness, which had led him, at his age, into what should never have been a marriage at all, and he unburdened himself of some of his self-reproach while carrying out orgies of brush-cutting and clay-pigeon shooting at some distance from the house. He did not think it was at all funny at the time. But we talked more candidly about his life then than we had been able to do since the summer after Jane died. Of course the collapse of the rather frantically inflated illusions of his last marriage left him once again alone with the unresolved grieving for Jane, with his anger at her loss, and with a sense that his life was purposeless and empty. He was, as he plainly said, in love with a dead woman. He began an unremitting campaign to remove the crab grass from the lawn in front of The Old Mill.

He had given up the idea of marriage but he was lonely. And he was lucky to meet one day, by chance, an old friend, Frances Whitney, who was not interested in marriage either, was free and independent, and besides, George said, "utterly crazy." Which meant, it turned out, that she was principally interested in modern dance, in making light-show sculptures and costume jewelry, and to some degree in quasi-occult matters. They became inseparable companions—a peaceful relation that lasted for the rest of George's life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In 1979 and 1980 I found myself in a financial mess. I had entrusted most of my savings and the half of my parents' savings that I had inherited to the friend of a friend already mentioned, who had promptly lost it, under cover of talk. In the meantime I had put down what money remained on a piece of land, on the first steps toward building a house on it, and on moving my books and papers from France. Suddenly there was no money, and I found myself with a half-paid-for piece of land, a partly-finished house that I could not live in or put my things in, and debts. George helped out, as did my sister and other friends, until I could scramble out of that one, and he was delighted to be able to tease me about my foolishness.

I was living in Hawai'i by then, but I saw him for part of each year, when I returned to New York, and my relation with him remained, on the surface, unchanged. But our lives and interests seemed to grow more and more divergent, and when I saw him I was disappointed at how little we seemed to be really talking to each other. I thought he was like an aging and withdrawn parent, unoccupied but distant and at times morose. As far as I could see he was interested in little—sports on TV, the biographies of generals or politicians—and it was hard to entice him to do things together, to spend evenings in town, to talk at any length about subjects that we agreed on.

After I moved to Hawai'i in the mid-seventies, I was at last divorced. George stubbornly refused to visit Hawai'i. He took to spending winters in Florida, with Frannie, where he sailed less and less. His health was beginning to fail him, and at last he sold *Shag*, and took up golf instead of sailing.

There was a breath of the old warmth in early 1982 when I returned to New York and met Paula, and introduced her to him. "You have a jewel this time," he said, and he spoke of her and behaved toward her with a total unreserved admiration that I had seen him express for no woman besides Jane. Paula and I returned to Hawai'i in 1983, and I saw George on our trips back to New York several times that year. My last picture of George was taken at our wedding party just before Christmas. He looks as though he is having a good time. His fondness for Paula and his approval of the marriage was a kind of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

confirmation of the affection for each other that had been there, virtually unspoken, for so many years.

A few times, after the winters in Florida, he and Frances sailed up the inland waterways on a chartered boat, and he wrote still with obvious pleasure about the trips, the country, the waterway, the birds, as he did of the human fauna in Florida. But ill-health was bearing him down and it shadowed his letters. He sailed for the last time in 1985, on the New England coast, and regretted it. "The trip was windless, cold, fog, rain . . . My pledge [to never get another sail boat] is now carved in stone in a special place in my brain."

That year Mina died, and not long afterward he had a heart attack—apparently a small one, but a warning. He said nothing about it, and both Jane's daughter Linda, who lives in Texas, and I were cross with him about that. Paula and I had begun trying to lure him and Frances out to Hawai'i instead of Florida, but he was clearly not going to countenance any further changes in his routine:

> If you think that ad you sent us about the new development on Maui made our mouths water you should be surrounded, as we are, by the glamorous ads, brochures, TV pictures etc. of Florida's retreats for the aged. Hot and cold running blonds, jacuzzis, swimming pools, two golf courses to choose from for each one in his 'golden' years, no wind at all, uniformly warm, but not hot, weather, plus nearby culture, art, libraries, and the wonderful stimulating company of the other octogenarians.

At the same time:

> At least one good thing about being mildly apprehensive about health in Florida is that you are not unique. The TV is overcome daily with good advice for the incontinent, the arthritic, the denture wearer, or those unfortunates with pains in the back, liver, spleen, or you name it. As far as my own health is concerned, I guess it's improving. I'm back to walking two miles a day, hitting some golf balls not very hard and generally prospering. As you will learn to your dismay, the aging process is a pain in the ass. Mina kept warning me, until I lost patience,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what a bore it is to be old. All I can say is that, although rarely correct about most things she was right about that.

But he was still interested, back in Mamaroneck, in a friend's fight to keep a neighboring yacht club from jamming up the cove with a marina. It was a rearguard action in which George had been involved for a number of years, and temporarily at least, it was succeeding. "It would be a real tragedy," George wrote, "if his [the club owner's] dream of parking another fifty boats at the mouth of the cove died. What I always say is, 'You can't stop progress, but you can sure as hell slow it down.' What do you always say?"

In early April of 1986 we returned from a week away on the Big Island of Hawai'i during which I found myself thinking about him a great deal. We had spoken on the telephone several times that spring, after his heart attack, and I was anxious about him. Telephone conversations with him had never been very satisfactory. He was usually impatient to get off the phone, and I am not fond of the instrument. Most of the time we used it only to arrange to meet. But I wanted to talk to him. Those last conversations had been brusque and frustrating. I had been writing him a letter in my head. A message was waiting for us when we got home, saying that he had died two days before, as we had been sitting out an awesome thunderstorm on Hawai'i. He had just got back to Mamaroneck from Florida a week or so earlier, and had been feeling generally wretched. But he had gone for his favorite walk, through the marsh west of The Old Mill, which he and a neighbor had bought in the early seventies and turned over to the Nature Conservancy in memory of Jane. He and I had walked there on my last visit to Mamaroneck. It is the long tidal estuary of a small stream, and though it is near human habitation, it is full of birds, wild life, marsh flora, and is surrounded by remnants of old orchards run wild. He had fallen at the entrance to the marsh, where neighbors found his body a little later.

I was sometimes puzzled by the durability and strength of our friendship, on both sides. Obviously, something of it fitted no patterns and no conceivable expectations. Besides be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing a friend through all those years, he led me to other friendships that I value—something, on the face of it, surprising for someone who found it so difficult, so embarrassing, to show or even to admit affection. But a number of his other friends remained bound to him with admiration and deep fondness, for many years. One for whom George felt unlimited regard was Robert Penn Warren. George and Warren obviously delighted in each other's company, and they had sailed together on a chartered boat, in Greece, in the seventies. After George died I wrote to Mr. Warren about it, and he wrote back with characteristic generosity:

> A more remarkable man than George I never knew, nor a man to whom I was more temperamentally drawn. Though I suppose that this would have seemed improbable in the light of some abstract definition of the two of us. Later on I was somewhat surprised to hear Vann Woodward say the same thing about George. Vann thought that he was a great discovery—a kind of man he had been looking for all his life.

I was glad that Mr. Warren also said, "somehow we have grown to associate your presence with his presence." There is no one to thank.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Cup of Jo

Marianne Wiggins

Light striking water in the vase of branches casts a sundog on the pale green blotter of the old man's desk and he is halfway through the letter he is writing when it dawns on him the friend to whom this letter is addressed is gone. He's dead, this friend. This friend of his who'd like this letter, how could he forget? Too long ago to be remembered, nothing left to do but stop but still he'd like to finish. He'd like to feel as full of news as when he started it, he'd like to have that news a rainbow on his mind, to see it clearly as this pot here on this dotter. Pesk. This spot here on this blotter on his desk. This . . . *pen*! yes. This what this *pen* this instrument: This water dropping down.

Saying something: What's she saying? Doesn't know how young she is. She doesn't know how young a thing can look in what's this instance sort of thing that dances, *daylight*:

"Uncle Harry?" she is saying. "You've been crying. Do you understand? These words? You're crying. Here. Your tears are falling down. You've made your paper wet, see? Here: You're crying. Tears. These things are tears: Now. You've been crying. Can you tell me why you're crying: Harry? Try."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

. . . Fry: a hundred of them. Joey, *Trout*!

"Oh, you've made a picture. May I see it? Harry? What you've drawn?"

This is Joey's fetter.

. . . *Letter*!

"Oh, it's pretty, Harry: Hold it up. It's very pretty. Am I right to think you've drawn a fish?"

Yes! a *dish* . . .

The stream.

"And such a pretty fish, what kind of fish are we supposed to call this, Harry? What name are we supposed to give it? Is it a goldfish? Harry? Is it *a whale*?"

. . . the color of intestines:

This. Is. Something. Fish. *Thisisatrout.*

"Is it a fish you want someone to cook for dinner? Harry?"

Catch. It is a *fish.* Snake River. Jo.

"Or am I wrong to ask if it's a fish at all," she wonders.

"Can you try to tell me why this drawing makes you cry?" she asks.

. . . its freckles:

Speckled!

God that kind of blue.

"Does this picture make you think of something sad?"

Tent? No: camping on Snake River, me and Jo, the ground is damp. Wet leaves. Pine needle smell. Big moon, the moon is big. It's moonlight. *We've been lucky ain't we* Joey says. He's talking weather. *Always are* I say. Then he ticks off all those names of stars.

"What is it, Harry—Look. You shouldn't cry like this. You're crying. Can you try and tell me why you're crying?"

Sky so blue: two men fishing, casting arcs like welders, equal weights, the river cast as fulcrum in their lives' mechanics.

"That's why I'm here, you know," she says, "for you to talk. You can talk to me. Remember?"

Sitting on the shore: Joey pulling on his boots, his saying *Harry, I dreamed last night I had a conversation with the Infinite* and my looking over at him, asking Well what'd it have to say forgodsake, Jo?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not. One. Word, he says.

How'd you have a conversation with it if it didn't say a word? I ask him. Joey?

"Uncle Harry?"

Jo?

. . . into water to our waists before the dawn, our oilcloths insulating us against the cold, as if we were night's larvae spawned inside bright bubbles. Fry were slapping! Early light. Before the stroke, the *strike*: small fry, at least a thousand of them. Slow steam rising off fast water. Thousands of them. *I'll be damned!* shouts Joey. *Strike*! the arc! the line! the net, bright water then that kind of blue that belly. Water cold and sharp around my wrists the trout's own element, like cuffs. Cold water like a razor if I slip, then Joey by the fire fingers purple with the cold his knuckles white around that cup that smell of something, kestrel pinned against a cloud behind his shoulder, *Harry* he was saying. Laughing. *What a morning*! That aroma rising, steamy, something: got the word now. Harry. *what a cup of jo*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Rick Bass is the author of *The Watch* (Norton, 1989), a short-story collection, and *Oil Notes* (Seymour Lawrence, 1989), a collection of essays. His stories have appeared in *The Paris Review, Antaeus, Esquire*, and many other magazines and anthologies. He lives in Montana.

Emmanuel Carrère has published four novels, including *Gothic Romance*, which won the Prix Passion (1984) and the Prix de la Vacation (1985). The American edition of *Gothic Romance*, from which this excerpt was taken, will be published by Scribner's. Carrère lives with his wife and son in Paris.

Lanie Goodman, the translator, currently resides in Nice, where she teaches Comparative Literature at the Université Canadienne en France. In addition to *Gothic Romance*, she has translated Emmanuel Carrère's *The Mustache* and Daniel Odier's *The Cannibal Kiss*.

Padgett Powell is the author of the novels *Edisto* and *A Woman Called Drown*. He is working on a collection of stories that will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1991.

Paul West is author of many novels, including *Rat Man of Paris, The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* and *Caliban's Filibuster*. This fall Paris Review Editions will publish Mr. West's *Portable People*, a collection of short biographical sketches. His next novel, *The Women of Whitechapel*, about Jack the Ripper, will be published by Random House in September.

Marianne Wiggins is the author of four novels, including *John Dollar*, and a collection of short stories, *Herself in Love*. Wiggins is a regular reviewer for the *New Statesman*, the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

POETRY

Tim Dlugos lives in New York and New Haven, where he is studying at the Yale Divinity School. His most recent book of poems is *Entre Nous*.

Alice Fulton's collections include *Dame Script with Electric Ballerina* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) and *Palladium* (University of Illinois Press, 1986). She has received many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, and her poems appeared in the 1988 and 1989 editions of *The Best American Poetry*.

Ghalib (1797–1869) is one of the most famous Urdu poets. His poems are still widely sung in the Indian subcontinent. These translations are based on the literal versions and notes of Aijaz Ahmad. **Jane Hirshfield**'s most recent books are *Of Gravity and Angels* (Wesleyan, 1988) and a translation, *The Ink Dark Moon*. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and other awards and has new poems forthcoming in the *Atlantic*, the *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere.

Andrew Klavan is the author of three novels, *Face of the Earth* (Viking Press), *Darling Clementine* and *Son of Man*. A frequent contributor to the *Village Voice*, he has won awards for both poetry and fiction, including the Andrew Fels Award, sponsored by the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, and the Edgar Award for a pseudonymous mystery novel.

Kenneth Koch's most recent books are *One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays* (1988), *Seasons on Earth* (1987), *On the Edge* (1986), and *Selected Poems, 1950–1982* (1985). An opera for which he wrote the libretto, *The Construction of Boston*, with music by Scott Wheeler, was performed this past winter. He lives in New York.

James Laughlin's most recent books are *Selected Poems 1935–1985* (City Lights, 1986), *The Owl of Minerva*, a book of poems (Copper Canyon Press, 1987), and *Pound as Wuz*, essays and lectures on Ezra Pound (Graywolf, 1987). He is the publisher of New Directions. A two-part interview with Laughlin, entitled "The Art of Publishing," appeared in issues 89 and 90 of *The Paris Review*.

Elizabeth Macklin is the poetry editor of *Wigwag* and has published poetry in the *New Yorker, Lyra*, and the *Southwest Review*.

Walter McDonald's book of poems, *After the Noise of Saigon* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), won the 1987 Juniper Prize. His latest book is *Night Landings* (Harper & Row, 1989).

Kathleen Norris lives in South Dakota. Her most recent books are *The Middle of the World* and *The Year of Common Things* (Wayland Press). Her poems have appeared recently in *Agni, The New Yorker, Prairie Schooner* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Oskar Pastior was born in Hermannstadt, Romania. He came to West Germany in 1968, where he has written poems, translations, and radio scripts.

Malcolm Green, who was trained as a psychologist, has been active for many years as a translator and editor of anthologies.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reynolds Price published his first novel *A Long and Happy Life* in 1962. His eighth, *The Tongues of Angels*, has just been published by Atheneum. He has also published volumes of short stories, poems, plays, essays and translations. His third collection of poems *The Use of Fire* will appear this fall. He lives by a pond in Orange County, North Carolina, and teaches for a part of each year at Duke University.

Yannis Ritsos is one of Greece's leading poets. Much honored in Europe, he is the most prolific Greek writer of this century, having published over a hundred volumes of poetry, prose, drama, and translation. **Edmund Keeley**'s latest book is *The Salonika Bay Murder: Cold War Politics and the Polk Affair.* His new collection of translations, *Yannis Ritsos: Repetitions, Testimonies, Parentheses*, will be published by Princeton University Press in 1990.

J. Allyn Rosser's first book, *Bright Moves*, will be published by Northeastern University Press in the fall of 1990. Her poems have recently appeared in *Crazyhorse*, the *Georgia Review*, the *Gettysburg Review*, the *Hudson Review, Poetry*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate student in English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania.

Robert Saxton was co-winner of the 1988 Times Literary Supplement/ Cheltenham Festival of Literature poetry competition. His poems will appear in Faber & Faber's *Poetry Introduction 7.*

Susan Wheeler is a poet living in New York City. Her poems have appeared in *Sulfur, New American Writing, Witness,* and *Shenandoah*, among other journals, and in *The Best American Poetry of 1989*, published by Macmillan.

Baron Wormser's most recent collection of poetry is *Atoms, Soul Music and Other Poems*, published by Paris Review Editions.

FEATURES

Shusha Guppy is London Editor of *The Paris Review*, and a regular contributor to *The Daily Telegraph, British Vogue*, and other periodicals. She is the author of *The Blindfold Horse*, an autobiographical work. *Looking Back*, a collection of her interviews with some of the grandes dames of European letters, will be published by Paris Review Editions in the fall of 1990.

W. S. Merwin is the author of numerous books of poetry and translation including *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, Asian Figures, Transparents of the World, The Carrier of Ladders*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972, and *The First Four Books of Poems.*

INTERVIEWS

James Atlas is the author of *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poet, and is an editor of the *New York Times Magazine*. He is currently working on a biography of Saul Bellow.

James R. Hepworth is an assistant professor at Lewis-Clark State College and is the Director of Confluence Press in Lewiston, Idaho. He is the co-editor of *Resist Much, Obey Little: Some Notes on Edward Abbey* (1985). He is currently completing a book on Wallace Stegner's fiction.

Jeffrey Meyers is a professor of English at the University of Colorado. He is the author of twenty books on modern literature including biographies of Katherine Mansfield, Wyndham Lewis, and Ernest Hemingway, and edited *Hemingway: The Critical Heritage*.

ART

Jessica Diamond was born in the Bronx and lives in New York. Her work has been shown recently at American Fine Arts, Co., New York.

Raymond Pettibon was born in Tucson, Arizona, in 1957, and lives in Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions of his drawings have been held at Zero-One Gallery, Los Angeles, and Feature Gallery, New York.

Steve Wolfe was born in Pisa, Italy, in 1955, and lives in New York. His paintings and drawings are shown at Diane Brown Gallery, New York.

The Paris Review **is pleased to announce that Dan Stern's "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life by Sigmund Freud," published in issue 110 is the 1989 winner of the John Train Prize for Humor.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DENVER QUARTERLY

Announces

A SPECIAL ISSUE FOR SPRING 1990

James Schuyler: a celebration

This illustrated issue will feature essays and memoirs by John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, Douglas Crase, and many others.

Please send me ____ copies of the Schuyler issue at $5 each. Payment enclosed.

Name

Address

City

State Zip

OR

Please begin my subscription to the Denver Quarterly ($15 per year) with the Schuyler issue.

UNIVERSITY of DENVER
University Park, Denver, Colorado 80208

DENVER QUARTERLY
Department of English

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New Releases from The Paris Review.

Twice Told Tales

Stories by Daniel Stern

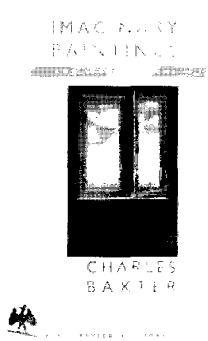
$14.97 (Orig. $18.95 . . . *save 21%*)

"Daniel Stern's ingenuity—his originality—is his transformation of the great Modernist Seminal Works into the heroes of his stories.

Brooksmith, for instance, is the glorious protagonist of Stern's 'Brooksmith by Henry James'. If you are reminded of Borges you will not be wrong, but put the thought aside; Stern's half-dozen antic and sorrowful tales more powerfully, and more bouncingly, suggest Ring Lardner, or else the lively diversions of Alice's tea table.

A child named Tulip is reared in the hatcheck room of a New York restaurant. A lover blindfolds himself in order *not* to find his way back to his love. A man writes a novel against his will. And, throughout, Freud, Hemingway, Trilling, Forster preside; famous names swarm; the hearts of artists and would-be artists blaze; the winter sun slants; New York lives; comedy whispers and sometimes roars; wit triumphs."

—Cynthia Ozick



Imaginary Paintings

Poetry by Charles Baxter

$5.95 (orig. $7.95 . . . *save 25%*)

Charles Baxter's *Imaginary Paintings* is the first book of poems by an emerging master of the short story. Baxter transforms the details of Midwestern landscape, intimate domestic tableaux, and the experience of art into a vision that is powerful and symphonic, deeply in the American grain.

"I read Charles Baxter's *Imaginary Paintings* with intense pleasure. This is poetry of the first order, characterized by an anguished, almost inconsolable lyricism, utterly immersed in the life that is, a life that tends to be ignored in our art, whatever the form."

—Jim Harrison

See Order Form elsewhere in this issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Writer's Chapbook

A Compendium of Fact, Opinion, Wit, and Advice from the 20th Century's Preeminent Writers

Edited by George Plimpton
$13.97 (orig. $19.95 . . . *save 30%*)

"The most candid, stimulating, and instructive handbook for would-be serious writers the world has so far seen." —Kurt Vonnegut

A fascinating and delightful survey of writers on writing in this collection of excerpts from *The Paris Review* interviews. Here are Hemingway, Faulkner, Eliot, Doctorow, Roth, among many others, discussing the nitty-gritty of the craft of writing in pithy and sometimes aphoristic statements. The highly personal observations about issues ranging from the development of plot, dealing with writer's block, the influence of alcohol and other drugs, the writing voice, provide a rare glimpse of what being a writer is really like.

"A superb, utterly fascinating book. If *Writers at Work* was the wine, this is the brandy. Very good brandy indeed. Indispensable for anyone with even the slightest curiosity about the mysterious work of writing."
—Frank Conroy
Director, Iowa Writers' Workshop

The Paris Review Anthology

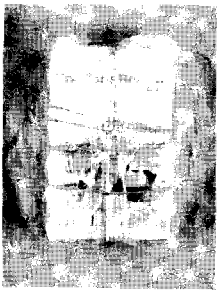
Edited by George Plimpton
$17.50 (orig. $25.00 . . . *save 30%*)

. . . Beckett . . . Calvino . . . Gunn . . . Wright . . . Milosz . . . Simpson . . . Gordimer . . . Dubus . . . Bly . . . Ashbery . . . Bass . . . Brodkey . . . Minot . . . Brodsky . . . Dickey . . . Hughes . . . Merwin . . . McInerney . . . Salter . . . Simic . . . Boyle . . . Ginsberg . . . Southern . . .

"Venerable at 35 and justly venerated for its unequalled mix of fiction, poetry, interview and essay, *The Paris Review* remains the single most important little magazine this country has produced. A glimpse through the table of contents of this new compendium will demonstrate why: the editors have launched a thousand careers and consistently published the best work of some of the best writers of our time." —T. Coraghessan Boyle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Recent Books from Paris Review Editions



Bennett's Angel
a novel by Barton A. Midwood
$18.95

"The discerning reader and lover of literature should follow Bart Midwood in his literary career. He is a master of dialogue. His humor is genuine. . . . Bart Midwood is a writer capable of bringing us many surprises."
—Isaac Bashevis Singer

Memories of Amnesia
a novel by Lawrence Shainberg **$16.95**

"A fascinating and intriguing novel, *Alice Through the Looking Glass* rewritten in the language of modern neurosurgery." —J.G. Ballard

Shine Hawk
a novel by Charlie Smith **$18.95**

"Charlie Smith seems to have sprung fully armed from the head of Zeus, with zest and plenitude all in his pocket. He reads like a dream."
—Edward Hoagland

Love and Will
twenty stories by Stephen Dixon **$18.95**

"A master of the short story . . . shows his talents at their peak. Here craft and technique are truely realized, and so is the message they convey. Mr. Dixon is a highly distinctive writer, one whose work has grown richer and deeper over time." —The New York Times

Atoms, Soul Music and other poems
by Baron Wormser **$7.95, paper**

"*Atoms* is the finest political poem I've read in a long time—'political' in the broadest sense. It is intelligent; it is thorough, it is extraordinarily inventive and compelling. Everyone should read it." —Hayden Carruth

Morning Run
poetry by Jonathan Galassi **$7.95, paper**

"Thoughtfully constructed and limpidly phrased. Jonathan Galassi's poems will stay in the mind for many seasons to come." —James Merrill

See Order Form elsewhere in this issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Selected Back Issues of The Paris Review

The Paris Review *Fifth Anniversary Issue* (1957).
Includes legendary interview with Ernest Hemingway, first published story by Philip Roth, portfolio of drawings by Giacometti, W.S. Merwin and Robert Bly poetry, and more.
Original Edition, $25.00

Issue Twenty (1958)
Original publication of Philip Roth's novella *Goodbye, Columbus.* Plus an interview with James Jones, drawings by Marc Chagall, poetry by Louis Simpson, Robert Bly, Charles Wright, William Stafford, and others.
Original Edition, $20.00

Issue Sixty-Four (1975)
Interviews with Kingsley Amis and P.G. Wodehouse, fiction by Thomas Disch, portfolio by Vali Myers with commentary by ed. George Plimpton, and more.
$10.00

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Issue (1981)
Fiction by Raymond Carver, William Faulkner, William Gass, Terry Southern; essay by Ernest Hemingway; poetry by John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, Thom Gunn, John Hollander, Kenneth Koch, Joyce Carol Oates, William Stafford, Charles Wright, and many more; plus *The Paris Review Sketchbook*—a rich history of *The Paris Review.*
Double Issue, $12.00

Issue Eighty-Two (1981)
Interviews with Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Márquez; fiction by Julio Cortázar, Jamaica Kincaid, Joy Williams; translations from the poetry of Baudelaire by Richard Howard, Rilke by Stephen Mitchell.
$7.00

Issue Eighty-Six (1982)
Includes first published story by Jay McInerney, plus fiction by Norman Mailer, interviews with Erskine Caldwell and P.L. Travers, portfolios by Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, cover by Sandro Chia.
$10.00

One Hundredth Issue (1986)
John Hersey, John Irving interviews; Mary McCarthy, Ezra Pound, James Laughlin, Gertrude Stein Features; Nadine Gordimer, Alice Munro fiction; John Ash, Harold Brodkey, Raymond Carver, Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill, Czeslaw Milosz, Robert Pinsky, Charles Simic, Charles Wright poetry.
Double Issue, $10.00

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Donald Sultan's Black Lemon *for Paris Review's 100th Issue*

The Paris Review Poster Series

Anuszkiewicz · Christo · Chryssa d'Arcangelo · Paul Davis · Dine Jimmy Ernst · Janet Fish · Glaser Frankenthaler · Freilicher · Arnold Hoffman · Hockney · deKooning Indiana · Kanowitz · Krushenick Kelly · Kushner · Lewitt · Lindner Lichtenstein · MacConnel · Marca-Relli · Marisol · Motherwell · Salle Nevelson · Rauschenberg · Steve Poleskie · Oldenburg · Rosenquist Ortman · Shahn · Stamos · Trova Steinberg · Summers · Ungerer Vicente · Warhol · Wilson · Wesley Youngerman

For a free catalogue, write:
The Paris Review / 541 E. 72nd St. / New York, NY 10021

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Associates of The Paris Review

The Associates of The Paris Review are those organizations and individuals whose support helps make publication of The Paris Review possible.

ALAN AND ARLENE ALDA
BROOKE ASTOR
BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB, INC.
ETHELYN ATHA CHASE
MARGARET COOK
COORDINATING COUNCIL OF LITERARY MAGAZINES
SAGE AND JOHN COWLES
DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
HAYDEN (SIDD) FINCH
DRUE HEINZ
DR. WILLIAM KATZ & SUSAN STANTON KATZ
MATTEL ELECTRONICS
NEIL A. McCONNELL
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS
MR. & MRS. PAUL NEWMAN
WILLIAM S. PALEY
THE PLAYBOY FOUNDATION
HAMILTON F. RICHARDSON
EDWARD ST. GEORGE
SCRIPPS-HOWARD FOUNDATION
FRANCIS ALBERT SINATRA
THE STANTON FOUNDATION
FRANK AND DOMNA STANTON
EDWARD S. STEWART
MRS. JOHN HAY WHITNEY

Inquiries about becoming an Associate should be directed to
The Editors, The Paris Review, 541 East 72nd St., New York, New York 10021

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Holbein

NO. 30C-1

JAPAN

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED